WOMEN MAKING ART MAKING WOMEN
Seminar Paper

Given by Anne Riggs, PhD Candidate and Artist at Victoria University, seminar, WomenMakingArtMakingWomen 6 November 2008.

It is really wonderful to be discussing women and creativity; I am thrilled there are people here from a such a diverse range of disciplines who are also interested in creativity - today I would like to introduce you to "my world" – the world of a visual artist.

Meaningful art is about an engagement, an exchange - a communication, a conversation, if you like, between the artist, (the maker), the art and its audience. In this work, the audience is first and foremost the self – the maker – as well as group of women, then the wider community, which now includes you.

Art is a process through which the unknowable, unsayable, and unformed can be revealed, examined, held, understood and shared. It goes to the essence of our human-ness; to what is of importance, where meaning might be found and how it might be expressed, how we understand ourselves, and ourselves in relation to the world around us.

The art that I am talking about today has emerged out of the shadows of grief and loss, the darkness of sexual abuse, trauma, and anger. It is sad, painful, sorrowful, at times funny and often hopeful. It is the response to heartfelt and passionate exchanges between the women, the women and me, and with a number of invited guests, who also know about suffering. Through those exchanges, transformations have occurred.

Culturally, we are very attached to words; we think and speak in metaphor, receive much of our knowledge, heritage and cultural understanding via words - we seek insight and comfort in words, and rely heavily on them as a means to healing and wellbeing.

As many of you understand, verbalising trauma and all that goes with it can be impossible, or difficult, for those who have experienced it; as I found during this project, this inability to process in words affects not only the spoken work, but extends to thought - the trauma cannot be thought about clearly - the language to express just isn't available.

The visual arts is another language; another means of expression, communication and understanding. Like all forms of communication, the visual language can be simple or complex; layered with metaphor, clunky, clumsy, poetic or beautiful.

As the artist, I see my role is to help expand that language by developing skills and vocabulary, thus enabling the women to express and understand themselves as mature adults. This is a central factor in the work; the one that I would like to focus on in today's seminar.

Without that pivotal place being held by the artist, the women would be floundering with the visual skills and language of a child, and therefore, would be ill-equipped to express the complexities that confront them. The contribution of the artist is what defines the work, and suggests that why handing someone a pack of textas or block of clay won't enable the transformations to understand and accommodate trauma.

I was surprised to learn of the excitement many women felt at the prospect of working with an artist; it touched me deeply, because in that, I saw a love of art and an openheartedness that in many ways undermined the commonly held belief that people who experienced trauma are 'loathe to trust'. There was a belief in them that artists see things differently and feel things passionately - Many thought working with an artist would provide the opportunity to see things through "different eyes", and therefore shift some of their own lives in some way. I think what was commonly felt was expressed by one participant who said, "I realise that if I keep doing things the same way, I will get the same results. And it's not working for me".

A project such as this is largely moulded by the artist who is running it; therefore, this project is very much informed by my artistic processes, influences, interests, life experiences and work practices etc. together with the responses I make and bring to the women, their work and interests. I respond to their responses, and that further influences what is brought to the group and art-making.

The project did not evolve from any acknowledged need in the field of sexual trauma therapy; but born of my own experiences as a maker and community artist, and guided by an arts practice that for 20 years has been made around themes of grief and loss - and my engagement with the community – particularly of very vulnerable people and being witness to amazing shifts within participants.

Alongside the work with the women, I am creating a body of work responding to trauma, grief and loss - made before, during, and after - the projects with the women. There are a lot of different themes and explorations in that work, I will talk a little later one about a couple of aspects of the work, and what I think they contributed to a conversation about trauma.

Part of process of the work was to invite other voices into the conversation; knowing that some women would respond to some; a chance encounter would spark off a new train of thought; forthright voices might suggest that it was not necessary here to be silent, censored or polite; I invited artists and artworks who I felt had something to contribute to the discussion we were having about Trauma, Grief and Loss. Otto Dix, Linde Ivemy, Antony Gormley, Edvard Munch, Louise Bourgeouis and Alberto Giacometti were amongst these voices.

A recent visit to Schloss Moyland – The Joseph Beuys Archive in Germany - spoke so clearly to me about trusting myself and accepting the process of my work. When I was full of doubt about my own work, which seemed so shambolic at the time, his work and processes suggested perseverance and confidence; it reminded me that what we are grappling with here is hard – it is murky – the path through it is not clear and that's why we are doing it.

Joseph Beuys spent his lifetime grappling with Germany's past and responsibilities post 2nd world war, and how that country and its culture might be healed.

In the Archive, there were thousands and thousands of works, paintings and sculptures, plaster casts, and small offerings of materials put together, contemplations of healing the wounds, or feeding a starving population. It was breathtaking, and strange.

The amazing amount and variety of his work re-iterated that there is no one answer, no easily solutions, no shortcuts, distractions or avoidance if you really seek to understand, acknowledge and find a place of comfort and resolution.

In my conversation with Joseph Beuys I felt energised to pursue the path my own work was taking, and found the inspiration – the missing piece, if you like, of how to start the work on Grief and Loss with the women.

Casting opened up enormous possibilities for examination and expression of the impact of trauma.

Every impression made into the clay will occur in the plaster cast; yet transformed into a mirror and opposite image – indentations will be raised, and raised areas become indentations. Left is right. Up is down. Negative becomes positive.

It is incredibly difficult, when working in this reverse and opposite method to create in a way that is entirely predictable. Distortion is the norm. The process allows for the examination of trauma, for the expression of the distortions that accompany it and a place to consider impact. It is also impossible to achieve "perfection" – whatever that is – but it is an ambition of many people who have experience of trauma.

The cast is more about evoking than telling; more about giving expression to - rather than - narrating what has been felt, silenced, unacknowledged, and perhaps un-understood.

One noteworthy characteristic of the casting process is its capacity to express absence; to give form to something that was, and is no longer; and to that which *never* was. Another is its capacity to shift the way you think, because with this technique – nothing is what it first seems. Although this was an immensely difficult task for many of the women, the casting kicked off this process of re-thinking trauma.

Embedding or pressing personal objects into the plaster casts enabled the women to think about their own experiences of grief and loss, what memories remain, what has left an indelible imprint?

The artists tools of trade are materials, art is borne out of a transformation of those materials. As I alluded to before – the process of artmaking is one of discovery, an unfolding – there is rarely an "answer"; although one does hope revelation.

Subjecting materials to the extreme environment of the kiln provided a metaphor for trauma that was both inspiring and useful; "what happens when a material is placed under extreme tension? and what happens if that is repeated? Reactions to tension gave me a way to discuss strength and resilience; transformation; thoughts and feelings that are hard to describe – like that sensation of feeling dead inside, or separate from the world around.

Sculptures had bone fragments embedded within, or were built over bone before being subjected to temperature of 1100-plus. The bone emerged from the ordeal beautifully white or tinged with blue, looking remarkably intact; but gentlest handling can reveal the loss of structural strength and they break easily; wire and metal subjected to similar conditions become weakened and fragile – the thinner / smaller the material, the more vulnerable it becomes under tension.

There are combustible materials that totally burn away leaving little hint that they ever existed – a clay object could be built over a paper or wooden structure, and all that would be left might be a breath of white ash – still, its imprint may be fully present in the clay, opening up the possibility to acknowledge the stamp of trauma, or that empty feeling that sits in the gut.

A material that presents extraordinary potential is glass – the amount and nature of the tension it is exposed to will determine whether it withstands the heat, takes on a new form, crack, breaks, completely flow away; or remains clear. It can be immensely strong, fragile, sharp or soft edged. If you heat and cool the kiln slowly, the glass can mould to a new shape – it suggested a visual way of expressing how trauma happens and how the person is treated afterwards will affect whether the trauma can be accommodated or not. I love working with glass – it also has endless possibility when combined with other materials – whose response to tension (the firing process) is completely different. Its transparency and ability to take on the form of other materials, opened possibilities to consider resilience; and that space you feel – mostly in sorrow – that separates you from the rest of humanity.

The materials, the extreme environment, the natural incompatibility of some materials and stretching materials to their absolute limited offered scope for a broad investigation into trauma, grief and loss, and avoided the danger of 'illustration', particularly of a narrative not my own.

I don't tend to show my work to participants in my artgroup – but I share and I get excited about what is happening in the studio; discussions around materials opened up a whole world of thinking about things differently; The women could see the potential to built in strength, fragility, resilience, deception into the work. In the safe haven of the materials and making, she can touch her fragility, can express her strength; can face her violator in her own voice without exposing herself to disbelief.

Kathe Kollwitz' work is a personal favorite, and one that also touched many of the women. Much of her life's work attends to the subject of grief and loss – mostly arising out of social struggle.

The statues of grieving parents are both personal and universal symbols of loss. Kollwitz and her husband mourn their son, who died in the early days of the First World War and whose grave is located just in front of the statues. Notice in the mourning – the stoic devastation of the man and the emotional devastation of the woman.

Their son was keen to join up, although his parents share his fervour. Eventually, against her husband's wishes, Kollwitz relented and signed the papers allowing her son to go. He was dead within months. So added to her grief, was perhaps a sense of responsibility. The government called it 'sacrifice' and she struggled with that concept for years.

To understand, accept and mourn the death of her son lasted her lifetime; it took her nearly to the brink of her sanity, then years to harness that spectrum of emotions before she was able to create this monument - a memorial to her son, his fellow combatants and the countless parents who mourn them.

The potency of the work – in my view - lies in the space, the chasm, the nothingness between them. It is a remarkable acknowledgement of this only too common reality of grief.

This work offered the women the permission to grieve deeply, to feel deeply; to look inside and express their own deep personal losses. Kollwitz – in this work – struggled with the messy side of grieving – the guilt; the failure to connect; the ending time it takes; the distraction grieving has on the rest of one's life.

The women's responses to it revealed deep compassion - for the mother, but also for the father whose pain is clearly palpable, although his contained style could

easily be read as being unemotional. It struck me writing this, that whilst I thought the women would naturally identify with the woman, perhaps it was the man's containment that was more familiar.

Having now worked and spent considerable time with the women, I understood - in my heart, rather than just my head - about sexual abuse and its impact. Although women were neither asked nor expected to disclose their story to me, most chose to tell me some things; I learned that for most, the abuse began during their childhood or teenage years, and as a result - most of their lives had been tainted by the violation.

A couple of deeply affecting comments bought into sharp focus some of that experience; the first "I was abused almost from the womb", the other was "why didn't anybody help me?"

These comments have a potent universality amongst many victims of sexual abuse. Why wasn't the child's vulnerability recognised? and why wasn't help given?

I really like the women and I felt really pained that people had hurt them – particularly when they were very young – little. I made a lot of work that meditated upon how small, how vulnerable, a child is, and how somebody else's contemptuous will annihilated what should have been a loving and nurtured childhood.

Children's clothes were embedded in clay; held within the folds are reminders of the child who might have inhabited it. Subjected to temperatures in excess of 1100 the fabric fires away and a clay shell remains. Pure white. Structurally the garments are full of holes and so so fragile; if handled carelessly, they simply disintegrate. Ghosts of innocence.

Other children's clothes were plunged into plaster – immobilised, steamrollered and flattened; splayed. Fragments of their former character remain; and whilst they don't easily break, they are dulled and heavy. Their character has been retarded – or arrested – if you like.

I hope I have been able to give you a little insight into the processes behind the art project – and what I trying to bring to it.

… will now talk about her participation in the group – and how making has impacted on her.

One of the group participants gave a presentation- which I hope to post soon.

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