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## **Connecting with the Viewer: Affectivity and Cathexis in Textile Artwork**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores how, following bereavement, textile artwork may be able to make a connection with the viewer and allow a progression of their work of mourning. It takes an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from the literature of psychoanalytical theory, affectivity, and textile thinking to understand the importance of cloth as artwork in the grieving process. The article draws on the practice-based textile research of the author which, together with responses to the artworks made, discusses the way viewers can make an emotional investment in textile artwork and considers the concept of exhibitionary affect to increase the emotional connection of the viewer to the work.

Keywords: cloth, loss, mourning, textiles, art, cathexis, affect

### **Introduction**

This paper takes as its starting point the idea that, as individuals with experience of bereavement, we may carry with us an element of unresolved mourning. This is not the pathological condition of melancholia or complicated mourning, or the fully resolved, completed state where mourning is over, but is a space between; a set of emotions that continue to be felt and may be brought to the surface by an event, situation, set of circumstances, or encounter with, for example, artwork that may bring back feelings of grief and loss long after the death of someone close.

This paper investigates how cloth can be used in textile artwork to make a connection with this unresolved mourning and thereby contribute to the progression of the viewer's work of mourning. It uses an interdisciplinary approach, taking literature from the areas of psychoanalysis, trauma theory, and affectivity and applying them to artworks created from textiles. These textile artworks have been made as a result of practice-based research where exploration of the literature informs studio practice and the outcomes of that practice inform the direction of subsequent research. In this way the literature of these disciplines is used to support the premise that it is possible to create textile artworks that connect with the viewer and may allow a progression in their work of mourning. Responses to the works have been used to assess the impact of the work on viewers.

The aims of the research were to explore the importance of textiles in mourning and how textile art can be used as a metaphor for, and the materialization of, grief and mourning. In order to

understand the way in which this happens it is necessary to consider what mourning is and how it has been defined in psychoanalytical thinking.

### **The Work of Mourning**

The term “mourning” has been defined by professor of psychology Lynne DeSpelder as “the process of incorporating loss into our ongoing lives” (DeSpelder 1992, 234).

The term also contains within it a sense of time, a period of mourning, during which grief and sadness are present. In the context of this paper, mourning is defined as processual; a set of behaviors exhibited after bereavement whilst internal adjustment is made to the loss.

Sigmund Freud, in his essay *Mourning and Melancholia*, written in 1917, defines mourning as “the reaction to the loss of a beloved person or an abstraction taking the place of the person, such as fatherland, freedom, an ideal and so on” (Freud [1917] 2005, 203). This essay was written during the First World War, at a time of overwhelming and unprecedented numbers of casualties together with the overturning of national ideals and beliefs in Europe. He defines the process of mourning by explaining that, “in mourning, the bereaved gradually removes emotional ties of their libido to the deceased object by the ‘testing of reality’ – taking each memory and severing bonds with it, accepting that the object no longer exists” (Clewell 2004, 44). The remembering, repeating, and working through of memories continue as the mourner replaces the lost person with an imaginary presence. This “magical resurrection allows the mourner to prolong the existence of the lost person” (O’Neill 2007, 98) until the mourner eventually comes to realize that the deceased person no longer exists. Only when all bonds are severed can the work of mourning be completed and “we rely on it being overcome after a certain period of time, and consider interfering with it to be pointless, or even damaging” (Freud 2005, 204). This is work that is painful and requires emotional energy and so may result in some lethargy and “loss of interest in the outside world” on the part of the bereaved. Because this is tiring and demanding both physically and mentally, Freud terms it *Trauerarbeit*, translated as “grief-work” or the work of mourning. Freud states that this will eventually pass and the mourner will be free to make new attachments. The shared experiences with the deceased are examined and repeatedly remembered – music listened to together, places visited, and everyday common experiences are all mentally held up to reconfirm that the person is no longer here. This can often be observed in bereaved people as they go through old photographs, look at old clothes and possessions, reminiscing but also reconfirming their loss. It would seem that these definitions point to mourning as being processual with several recognizable stages through which the bereaved pass.

The importance placed on clothes and other textiles belonging to the deceased in these processes would suggest that the role of cloth in the working through of these feelings and the part textile artwork can play in the materialization and facilitation of the work of mourning should be considered.

### **The Importance of Cloth**

The manipulation of fabric in textile art has its own vocabulary: “fold, drape, stretch, stain and tear – it signifies an emotional range from intimacy, comfort and protection, to more disquieting states of restriction, fragility, loss and impermanence” (Curtis 1999, 2). The first word Curtis mentions in this vocabulary of textile art is “fold.”<sup>1</sup> The idea of folding textiles contains within it a sense of time – folds can be unfolded or ironed away. Folding can also be seen as a repetitive action – constant in the care of fabrics, washed, mended, ironed, and folded – the process of taking care, of meditative

rhythm in the action. Folding also gives us the word “enfold,” as in envelop, sheathe, swathe, swaddle, cocoon – all textile, all comforting.

The comfort that textiles provide starts early in life. As described by pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1953), transitional objects are, typically, textile objects such as blankets, pieces of cloth, or soft toys. They provide an intermediate developmental phase between the psychic and external reality at a time when a child is beginning to understand the separation between itself and its mother. Until this time the child sees the mother and itself as a whole. Understanding this separation causes the child to feel that it has lost something and the object is used to represent all types of mothering. The transitional object is the first “not-me” possession that the child owns and is particularly important at bedtime and as a defense against anxiety. Later in life, when a person dies, their clothes are often kept by the bereaved as a way of keeping the person close, of maintaining a connection with them. Most importantly, cloth will retain the smell of the person and may come to substitute for the person themselves. Margaret Gibson, writing in the journal *Mortality*, states that transitional objects “express the anguish and militate against the mother’s absence as a primary figure and corporeal site of absence and loss” (Gibson 2004, 288). She also suggests that transitional objects can work in this way in grief, as they become “both a means of holding on and letting go.” The garments or fabrics of the deceased are then associated with the first moments of mourning and so signify the memory of that devastating and overwhelming feeling as well as the memory of the deceased person. These become what she describes as “melancholy objects” which act to memorialize the intense immediate mourning period and signify the incomplete nature of mourning – that it never really goes away.

Cloth can also reference the absent body – cloth receives us, “receives our smells, our sweat, holds our shape” (Stallybrass 1993, 28). And when someone dies their clothes live on in our lives, reminding us of who has gone, as they are often kept by the bereaved and handed down the generations. Wearing the clothes of the dead can be a way of keeping them in the present – involving them in the lives of those left behind – maintaining a continuing bond with them, thought to be a healthy way to process grief.

### **Cathexis**

Our attachment to textiles as clothes and comforters involves an investment of interest or energy. Freud described this as a “cathexis,” where the mental energy of the person is concentrated on a particular object, person, or idea and is defined in the Collins English Dictionary as the “concentration of psychic energy on a single goal” (McLeod and Makins 1994). The use of cloth in textile artwork provides a medium through which both the artist and the viewer already have an emotional connection, to invoke emotions of grief and loss, and may allow the viewer to progress in their work of mourning.

As textile artist Catherine Dormor has written:

“As the artist creates meaning out of the material of their own practice, controlling signifier and signified within their own subjectivity, the viewer is brought into transitional relationship with that subjectivity and thus is enabled, through the cultural and physical materiality of textile to weave a generative space of signification for themselves – a process of cathexis.” (Dormor 2012, 82)

This suggests that the way this process of cathexis works in connecting the viewer to an artwork is something that needs consideration. Deleuze and Guattari describe a work of art as a “bloc of sensations, waiting to be activated by a spectator or participant” (cited in O’Sullivan 2001, 126). It would seem that Mikel Dufrenne, writing in *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, has a

similar view of the way the esthetic object interacts with the public when he states, “It is through our body ... that we remain in touch with the object” and “our body submits to the object, allowing itself to be moved by the object” (Dufrenne 1973, 57).

Whilst the artist can attempt to imbue a piece of work with meaning and to convey ideas of mourning and grief, the bereaved spectator, with their previous experience of mourning and grief, encounters the work and is able to connect, via the artist’s use of materials and devices such as metaphor, with the emotional affect of the piece. “The witness is not a pure spectator but an involved one – involved with the work itself” (Dufrenne 1973, 56). As an example of this, textile practitioner and writer Janis Jefferies responded in a physical way when encountering the work of tapestry weaver Soon Yul Kang. Soon Yul’s ash drawings were presented as crumpled pieces of paper superimposed on white woven tapestries. The drawings were created by echoing her memory of the circular movements her mother made with her hand on Soon Yul’s stomach when she was unwell as a child, but using ash created by burning letters from her mother, an act she describes as cremation as well as “the purification of rebirth” (Jefferies in Mitchell 2000, 67). Jefferies describes how “the haunting quality of the ash drawings, produce a physical ‘sensation’, a tingling of bodily nerves which still cut the flesh, wounds us as if experiencing a loss for the first time” (Mitchell 2000, 66).

Similarly, the following is a response, sent by a viewer, of a physical bodily reaction to the textile *Mendings IV* (a piece that, in the process of its making, had been torn, mended, stained, covered in ash, and pierced with nails) which was shown in the *Trauma. Grief. Loss: The Art of Bereavement* exhibition (Crafts Study Centre, Farnham, UK) in May 2015.

For me, this piece has such power and I responded to it physically as well as emotionally. It certainly hit me in the gut, right at the heart of my being. It took my breath away, which made me breathe with shallow breaths, using only the top part of my lungs causing me to be physically still, and quiet, to contemplate it. I continue to reflect on it, some time after having seen it. It was such a valuable experience responding to a piece of work physically and emotionally.

This description is an example of both the way art is described by Deleuze and Guattari as sensations being activated by the viewer and also of Dufrenne’s view that the “spectator is moved by the object.”

The importance of psychological as well as physical involvement in the interpretation of art suggests that Freud’s thinking in this area of psychoanalysis is a useful starting point in examining the interior processes involved in the creation of artwork.

### **Psychoanalytical Interpretation of Making Art**

Sigmund Freud’s essay *Mourning and Melancholia* ([1917] 2005) describes the psychoanalytical approach to defining and explaining the differences between successful and unsuccessful mourning, that is, melancholia. Freud also interpreted artistic creativity and the reception of art by the audience in terms of the development of his interpretation using psychoanalytical theory.

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (cited in Abella 2010), Freud understood artistic activity (in which he included literature as well as visual arts) as a sublimation of sexual desires and Abella states that therefore “sexual dissatisfaction can work as a motor for artistic creativity” (Abella 2010, 164). Freud compared art to “dream, children’s play, hysterical fantasies, neurotic symptoms, daydreaming and masturbation” (Abella 2010, 166). Hanna Segal developed Freud’s rather negative psychoanalytical interpretation of art and questioned what “specific factors ... enable an artist to produce a satisfactory work of art” and why the public is “touched by some works of art while not by

others" (Abella 2010, 167). Segal, however, unlike Freud, focuses on the idea of art being a reparation of loss; that the artist acknowledges their depressive anxieties and, rather than letting them become manic states (as described by Melanie Klein), can overcome them and allow them to be a creative stimulus.

There is a complexity in thinking about the artist as naturally melancholic, so predisposing them to be an artist, and the artist as bereaved maker, as well as the relationship to the bereaved spectator viewing the artwork. This would suggest that the role of the artist in the creation of artwork should be considered in terms of both their process of making the work and the influence their own personal experiences of bereavement has on that work.

### **The Complex Role of the Artist**

Julia Kristeva discusses the link between art and melancholia in her book *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*. Her interpretation of melancholia is that it arises from an unsuccessful separation from the mother.<sup>2</sup> This discussion begins with the supposition that "artists tend towards the melancholic pole of the psychical spectrum" (Lechte 1990, 35). Kristeva suggests that every artistic work, "even those geared to provoke a strong emotional response, is executed with a certain detachment." She describes the continuity between the artist's life and their work as *comportement*, not that the artist's life is represented in the work but that "the work is part of the artist's life." The artist then "evokes the attachment to the mother through the semiotic dimension of the signifying process, where the transposition of affect becomes rhythm, alliteration, intonation etc." Kristeva concludes that the "the work of art is the possible mark of a vanquished depression" (Kristeva, 36). The result is the creation of a physical manifestation of the artist's work of mourning – the work of art itself which is outside the body and can then be viewed by the spectator. It is unlikely that artists experience bereavement any more than others or that they feel the loss more intensely but they do have the ability, over and above that of others, to make work that communicates that pain and makes the private public.

Artist and theorist Bracha Ettinger describes the artist as a patient, so that the "artist loses her mind and spirit to the work, which the viewer analyses." But she then goes on to argue that the artist is also a doctor, the artwork becoming "both the illness and the remedy" (Ettinger 2002, 215). When the artwork is shown to the public, the "doctor-and-patient borderspace finds its echoes in the viewer; its vibrations impregnate the viewer's psychic borderspace" (Ettinger 2002, 218). These echoes make a connection with the viewer and allow a possibly unarticulated remainder of grief to surface and be relived.

The idea of Segal that the artist allows their depressive state to become a creative stimulus would seem to agree with the description by Anton Ehrenzweig of how an artist creates any work of art. Ehrenzweig, like Freud, suggests that art "is a dream, dreamt by the artist, which we, the wide awake spectators, can never see in its true structure" (Ehrenzweig 1967, 79). He proposes that an artwork "functions like another person, having an independent life" (Ehrenzweig 1967, 102), echoing Segal's assertion that the artist has to acknowledge that the work of art is "created by the self ... different from the self and thus being apt to be freely used by the self" (cited in Abella 2010, 169).

Thus the artist does not necessarily always have to be in a state of mourning to create art, but, because of the artist's naturally melancholic and depressive state, they themselves may occupy "the space between," the space between their natural melancholy as artist and any personal experience of mourning that they may have been through, which is then used to inform the artwork either unconsciously or consciously in reference to a specific loss or bereavement.

Susan Best, writing in *Visualizing Feeling*, states that “the arousal of feeling is one of the experiences art is expected to deliver” (Best 2014, 1). This arousal of feeling may be achieved through evoking an affect or mood change in the viewer, through the work itself and the way in which it is shown. This may then enable the viewer to have an emotional attachment to the work or to identify with the subject matter which may act as a catharsis for their experience of bereavement.

### **Affectivity and the Transmission of Affect**

With the artwork completed, the moment may eventually come for it to be shown to an audience. Mikel Dufrenne states that it is only when the work is shown to the public that it is truly completed and that it is “through the spectator that the work finds its own reality” (Dufrenne 1973, 47). As philosopher Mark Staff Brandl has written, the interpretation of the artwork should “seek the transformative through two questions: What does the act of interacting with this work allow me to discover in life? How does this change and improve experience i.e. reality?” (Brandl n.d.). For this, consideration needs to be given to the way the work of art produces bodily responses in the viewer or “affects” – that is, “moments of intensity, reactions in/on the body at the level of matter” (cited in O’Sullivan 2001, 125). There is much debate in the literature on the nature of affects, from the definitions of how they differ from drives, emotions, and feelings to how they function within the body and how they are brought into play in the reception of art.

Jonathan Flatley (2008), in *Affective Mapping*, attempts to distinguish between “emotion” and “affect.” He argues that “emotion suggests something that happens inside and tends toward outward expression whereas affect indicates something relational and transformative” giving the example that “one has emotions; one is affected by people or things” (Flatley 2008, 12). An affect therefore needs an object to enable its manifestation. Best suggests that affect is best described as “a collective term that encompasses both emotions and feelings” (Best 2014, 5).

In 1962 the American clinical psychologist Silvan Tomkins described nine distinct basic affects: shame/humiliation, interest/excitement, joy/enjoyment, surprise/startle, anger/rage, fear/terror, distress/anguish, “dis smell” (elicited by bad smells), and disgust (elicited by bad tastes). Flatley proposes that these work in constant flux with each other, in that affects are always amplifying, dampening, or otherwise modifying some other affect, or drive, or perception or thought process, or act or behaviour, resulting in a well-nigh infinite number of combinations between different affective microsystems and their feedback mechanisms in interaction with their environments. (Flatley 2008, 16)

Deleuze describes this interaction of different states as processual: it occurs both as an action by the affecting body and as a response to that action by the affected body. *Affectio* refers to the state of an affected body and implies the presence of the affecting body, whereas *affectus* refers to a passage from one state to another, in relation to the correlative variation of the affecting bodies. (Deleuze cited in Tygstrup 2012, 199)

Therefore, when someone experiences distress and sadness at the death of someone close, the result of the distress/anguish affect has come to predominate in the complex of affects in operation at that time and it is a process/synthesis/interaction between the affector, that is, whatever is causing the affect, and the affected. In the case of my own work, the affector is the combination of cloth and stitch coupled with the use of devices such as metaphor. In contrast to affect, emotions “can be distinguished as the result of the interaction of affects with thoughts, ideas, beliefs, habits, instincts and other affects” (Flatley 2008, 16). That is, they are a complex of affects and other factors that all contribute and interact to make up the emotion. Clare Hemmings, writing in *Invoking Affect*,

describes affects as “states of being rather than their manifestation or interpretation as emotions” (Hemmings 2005, 551). In psychoanalysis, affects are the qualitative expression of our drives’ “energy and variations” (Giardini cited in Hemmings 2005, 551). Tomkins distinguished between affect and drives because of their independence of how long they last and what invokes them. As an example, Tomkins states that someone who is experiencing suffocation will not be panicking because of the dwindling supply of oxygen, as the lack of oxygen makes one drowsy, but that the panic “is the result of the amplifying effects of fear” (Tomkins cited in Flatley 2008, 13).

The psychoanalytical processes by which affects work has been analyzed extensively but here the focus will be on the psychoanalytical interpretation of affects when the viewer encounters a work of art. Leo Steinberg draws the parallel between the psychoanalyst’s dispassionate but engaged mode of listening known as “evenly spaced attention” and the engagement with works of art by the viewer. His suggestion is that “the first response to new art should be to suspend judgement ... to give the intentions of the new work the space to emerge and become perceptible.” The aim is to “feel along with it as with a thing that is like no other” (Best 2014, 7). Freud used the term “transference” to describe how in therapy the patient transfers their feelings resulting from traumatic events in childhood and their affects onto the analyst and plays them out by talking about them. Best describes this as a way of processing feelings about a work of art that is consistent with the work of Freud, describing the encounter as not only transference, the thoughts and feelings associated with bereavement and loss being transferred to the artwork, but also informed by the personal and idiosyncratic circumstances of each individual viewer and “refracted through the particularities of the viewing subject” (Best 2014, 39). That is, the individual experiences, thoughts, and emotions that each person has act like a refracting prism through which the work of art is perceived, and will make a difference to the way in which they see the work of art and how they make a connection with it. The different experiences of grief and loss each individual viewer undergoes will determine the way the work is received, as will the environment in which it is exhibited.

### **Exhibitionary Affect**

The way the work of art is shown in exhibition, whether white cube space, crypt, library, or derelict building, and the atmosphere or affectivity of the space will have an impact on the way the work is perceived and the reaction of the viewer. The curatorial vision of the way the concept of the exhibition is presented has the ability to change the way in which the work is able to connect with the audience. Curator Jennifer Fisher describes the possible engaged positions of the curator as “fan, provocateur, midwife, opportunist, or cultural activist” (Fisher 2006, 28). By changing the lighting, the color of walls and floor, the flow through the exhibition, the curator is able to set the tone of the exhibition, allowing a transmission of the desired affect. As Teresa Brennan has written, “is there anyone who has not ... walked into a room and ‘felt the atmosphere’?” (Brennan 2004, 1). Brennan defines this transmission as a way of describing a process “that is social in origin but biological and physical in effect.” She states that affects do not only arise within a particular person but also come from without ... via an interaction with other people and an environment. But they have a physiological impact ... I mean that the emotions or affects of one person, and the enhancing or depressing energies these affects entail can enter into another. (Brennan 2004, 3)

With this emphasis on the environment, the opportunity for the viewer to connect with the artwork can be maximized by carefully considering the curatorial or exhibitionary affect in the way the work is shown to the viewer.

The affects achieved through showing work in different gallery situations can be demonstrated by the example of the textile work Seven. This work of hanging bedsheets has been shown in Gallery 2, Salt's Mill, Saltaire, in the Crypt Gallery, St Pancras Church, London, and in the James Hockey Gallery, University for the Creative Arts Farnham (Figure 1). Here the color of the walls, the lighting, the height of the ceilings, and the anticipated passage of the audience through the exhibition all contribute to the "atmosphere" and allow the viewer to spend time with the work and have the opportunity to understand and connect with it. These nonrepresentational elements work in conjunction with representational elements such as labeling and information panels that are used to communicate the intention of the exhibition and individual artworks.



Figure 1 Seven. Photo credit: Beverly Ayling-Smith.

### Viewer Responses

Responses to the artworks created during this research were obtained in three different ways. Firstly, response cards were used to invite comments on the works, how they made the viewer feel, and what they brought to mind. Secondly, responses were obtained from students following a lecture about the artworks, and the third method was to seek responses by personal communication in the gallery space, in exhibition reviews, on blog entries, and through unsolicited email communication.

Some of the responses gave a clear indication that the artwork had allowed the viewer to remember, reflect, and move on in their work of mourning. This is evidenced by a response received about the stitched linen work called remembering, repeating and working through made for the Cloth and Memory exhibition in 2012. It was created to give a sense of the overwhelming nature of grief in the first days after bereavement. At five meters wide by three meters high it takes up an



entire wall and, when one stands up close to examine the surface, it completely fills the viewer's field of vision.

"From a distance of over a decade (after several bereavements), I saw my experience of grief in "remembering, repeating and working through": a huge engulfing "wailing wall" that captured perfectly the discontinuity and mystery of the process. The indistinct edges – both of the entire piece and its component parts – spoke to the lack of defined boundaries. When does grief end? What "compartment" does it belong in? The assemblage of dark "moments" (not only representing the sharp sad ones, but also those kept out of the mind's eye for years afterwards) allowed me to visualize how large my losses were. It somehow made it okay to grieve. These deaths, after all, were NOT small things, even though one feels pushed to make them small, to get on, get up, get over it.

Standing closer, I was reminded of Japanese Himeshi-banten, the pieced protective firemen's jackets, and was overwhelmed with a sense that my "patchwork" of loss could also be a protective covering, a new re-purposing of experiences that might – just – become a cloak of wisdom. I saw the small white shards as emblematic of those rare and wonderful insights that the death of a loved one provides: the privilege of seeing this transformative stage, of helping to make a passing less painful, of participating in honouring a good life. And that made me content."

A written response to this piece demonstrates that the work spoke to the viewer and engendered a cathexis, not only allowing reflection on the events of the past (an example of Freud's stage of hyper-remembering) but also allowing a more positive vision of the experience and hope for the future. This shows a progression in the work of mourning and demonstrates the central role of textile. The way in which the textile pieces had been manipulated and stitched together was also influential in the connection to this viewer. This confirms the important role of textiles in creating a cathexis and suggests that it is an important medium to consider when making artworks referencing grief and loss and engendering an affect in the viewer. The communication of this affect from the artwork and the way it is displayed to the viewer with their uniquely personal and idiosyncratic experience may cause a feeling of empathy in the viewer.

### **Sympathy and Empathy**

Empathy has been defined by the American psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut as "the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another" (cited in Cartwright 2008, 2) and the "capacity for concern" (Pajaczkowska 2005, 79). Contrasting with sympathy (I feel sorry for how you feel), empathy has a more personal connection with the other whilst still acknowledging its otherness (I know how you feel). Film theorist Lisa Cartwright suggests that empathy is a moral perception.

In my empathy with you, in thinking I know how you feel, I do not need to know about you or identify with you ... I do not see from your position ... I may not necessarily know about or share your experience, much less your grief. I may even acknowledge that I cannot know what you feel from my own experience, even as I "feel for you". (Cartwright 2008, 24)

The term "empathy" is a translation of the German word *Einfühlung*, first used by the German philosopher Robert Vischer in 1873 in an attempt to "theorize the viewer's relationship to a work of art" (Saona 2014, 74) when he tried to describe the source of esthetic pleasure (Jahoda 2005, 154). Although the term *Einfühlung* was originally translated as "esthetic sympathy," it was later extended in meaning by the German philosopher Theodor Lipps to include "visual illusions and interpersonal understanding" (Jahoda 2005, 151).

Dominic LaCapra, writing on the representation of the experiences of the Holocaust, emphasizes the need to distinguish between arousing “empathy in the spectator” and “the primary experience of trauma” (cited in Bennett 2005, 8). He suggests that the two experiences are entirely different and cannot be thought of as equal. One is entirely personal and directly experienced whereas the empathy of the spectator of events such as the Holocaust can only really be a sympathetic imagining of the pain of others. Art theorist Jill Bennett, writing in *Empathic Vision*, interprets LaCapra’s concept of “empathic unsettlement” as describing “the aesthetic experience of simultaneously feeling for another and becoming aware of a distinction between one’s own perceptions and the experience of the other” (Bennett 2005, 8). Looking at the artwork draws the viewer’s attention to both the similarities and the differences between their and the artist’s experiences. The extent of the esthetic pleasure of the viewer therefore “derives from their identification with the internal world of the artist and with the reparative processes embodied in the work of art” (Abella 2010, 170). Freedberg and Gallese, who have investigated the neural processes involved in the empathic understanding of artwork, state that “most spectators of works of art are familiar with feelings of empathetic engagement with what they see” and that these feelings “might consist of the empathetic understanding of the emotions of represented others or ... of a sense of inward imitation of the observed actions of others in pictures and sculptures” (Freedberg and Gallese 2007, 197). Their research discovered that artwork with marked traces of the artist’s action in creating the work was more likely to elicit an empathetic engagement in the viewer. This is confirmed by the fact that a noticeable element of the written responses to the textile work remembering, repeating and working through is the reference to the stitch marks on the surface of the work. This is noted as a “way in” for the viewer to connect with the work. However not all connections viewers make with artwork necessarily have a wholly positive outcome; some may revive unwelcome memories of traumatic events.

### **Trauma and Art**

Concern has been expressed by writers in the field of trauma theory and the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder that the viewing of artwork that brings to mind the memory of traumatic events may expose the viewer to additional trauma. Psychologist William James argued that whilst we can remember feeling specific emotions we cannot remember exactly how they felt. However, emotions are revivable in that “we don’t remember grief or ecstasy, but by recalling a situation that produces those sensations we can produce a new bout of emotion” (cited in Bennett 2005, 22). This has been the subject of research in the field of Holocaust studies, the notion that any graphic imagery used in the representation of the atrocities that occurred during the Holocaust may itself be traumatizing. As the representation of these events cannot, by their nature, be as severe as those experienced first-hand, Geoffrey Hartman has suggested the term “secondary trauma” be used to describe any detrimental effect on the viewer, whilst LaCapra has used the term a “muted dose” (9) rather than suggesting that the effect is a retransmission of the trauma. LaCapra warns against the viewer identifying with the victim of trauma to such an extent that they become a surrogate victim. Instead he states that the empathic unsettlement of the viewer (or secondary witness) involves “a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognising the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place” (LaCapra 1999, 722).

Bennett’s discussion of the understanding of the nature of trauma-related art is useful to understanding the way in which artwork created during this research project operates for the viewer in the exhibition space. She suggests that trauma-related art should be thought of as “transactive” rather than “communicative” – that it can reach the viewer emotionally, but “does not ‘communicate’ the secret of personal experience.” Nor, I would argue, does it need to. To

understand the transactive nature of the work, the affect it engenders needs to be examined and consideration given to how the work is experienced by the viewer, as the affective responses are not “born of emotional identification or sympathy; rather they emerge from a direct engagement with sensation as it is registered in the work” (Bennett 2005, 7). The strong emotional attachment to textiles of the bereaved mediates this “direct engagement with sensation” through the vocabulary of experience that has been accumulated through the use of textiles in everyday life.

### **Loss as Trauma**

The nature of the trauma of mourning and grief is not the same as that of a physical trauma such as a wound from a stabbing or the violation of rape. It is the pain of loss, informed by personal experiences and circumstances that make it unique for each individual. The memory of that loss and its associated feelings and emotions will be unique and will change with the passing of time – perhaps fragmenting and dissolving. In an echo of the way Freud describes mourning as a wound that heals with time, Charlotte Delbo, writing about her experience in the Holocaust, stated that her Auschwitz self was encased in the skin of memory so that it could no longer touch her. But the skin of this memory is not only “tough and impervious, but also broken, ruptured and scarred.”

She writes that in dreams

“sometimes ... it bursts and gives back its contents ... I see myself again ... just as I know I was ... and the pain is so unbearable, so exactly the pain I suffered there that I feel it again physically ... it takes days for everything to return to normal, for memory to be “refilled” and for the skin of memory to mend itself”. (41)

This permeability of the skin of memory is like a wound opening up to bleed again. The return to the being-in-the-moment of new pain is like the trigger for the return to the first days of grief – a chance encounter with something familiar or the finding of a possession of the deceased can plunge the mourner back into the initial stages of bereavement, starting the process from the beginning again. In textile thinking this could equate to the thread of a mend being broken or a stain seeping to the surface of the fabric. This can happen through any number of experiences and each will be specific and unique to the individual bereaved person.

The recalling of emotions in this way may also, however, bring about a recall of any trauma experienced. Reliving, repeating, and experiencing again may have a beneficial effect in externalizing and reducing the impact of such strong emotions and feelings. Aristotle defined “catharsis” as the “purging of the spirit of morbid and base ideas or emotions by witnessing the playing out of such emotions or ideas on stage” (cited in Powell, n.d.). Aristotle proposed that in the viewing of tragic plays the viewer’s own anxieties are externalized and purged in a socially harmless way. The spectator is then released from negative feelings such as fear or anger. Richard Chefetz, writing in 1997, defines catharsis and abreaction as “the verbal or non-verbal expression of intense affect associated with a coherent narrative of experience that provides relief of chronic anxiety states” (cited in Mathe 2001, 2). It is the reliving of past experiences that have caused distress or dysfunction that allows an emotional release. It would seem, therefore, that viewing an artwork that brings to mind the negative emotions from experiencing bereavement may have a cathartic effect on the viewer.

This is evidenced by the communication in response to the textile work remembering, repeating and working through quoted earlier which demonstrated a remembering of the losses the person had experienced and an acknowledgement that it was important to take time to grieve. Having acknowledged this the correspondent then realizes that these experiences could actually be turned

into positive outcomes. Reliving the emotional experiences through the artwork enabled a release from the negative emotions, providing a sense of renewal and restoration.

The question remains, what happens when the viewer sees the work of art and is moved to remember the death of someone to the extent that it brings to mind their feelings of grief and makes it possible to progress their work of mourning? Each person or individual viewer brings their own recollections, memories, and experiences of bereavement and grief. Whilst grief is an emotion experienced by us all at some point in our lives, the individual details are inevitably different and unique to each person, artist and viewer alike. The use of textiles in the artwork, however, may allow a “way in” – a way of understanding what the work is about because of our constant association with textiles as clothes and comforters.

### **Experience and Autobiography**

The idea that the viewer brings their own experiences of mourning and bereavement to the artwork and that this informs their viewing also suggests that post-structuralist theory may be useful in trying to understand the viewing process. In literature, post-structuralist theory states that the author’s intended meaning is secondary to the meaning that the reader perceives. This idea was first described by Roland Barthes in his essay of 1967 “The Death of the Author.” Barthes rejects the idea that a text has a single meaning and states that every reader of the text creates a new and individual meaning and existence for the text (Barthes 1993). This will also be true of the reception and interpretation of works of art. Eco and Robey (1989) posited in *The Open Work* that contemporary works of art have an undefined meaning and that these works have to be completed by the individual interpreter in accordance with their own knowledge.

Art historian Norman Bryson, in the introduction to Mieke Bal’s book *Looking in: The Art of Viewing*, suggests that the notion of the inward process of spectatorship was first developed in the field of film studies and has since been applied to the viewing of artworks in general. This field acknowledged that viewers brought to “their experience of visual culture much more than iconographical knowledge” but also that “they brought with them their deepest desires and anxieties, their whole history of having been socialized according to the specificities of gender and sexuality” (Bryson in Bal 2001, 7).

Whilst it can be seen that the act of the viewer encountering the work enables its completion, the role of the artist’s experience is also important in the initial creation of the work and its ability to convey the intended emotions. Although not necessarily following the expressive theory of art, which understands a work of art as being an expression of the artist’s feelings, the work may not relate to a specific incident in the artist’s life. However, the experience of emotions such as those felt after loss and in grief enables the artist to draw on such memories; for example, stitching in silence in a meditative atmosphere, thinking about the those who have died and the feelings associated with that, provides, as Jefferies writes, the ability to “mediate works of mourning, through a ‘translation’ of their psychic (or inner reality) and a process of an “ecstatic solace of communication” to produce a “sharing community of representable worlds” (cited in Mitchell 2000, 66).

One approach in the making of art which responds to an emotional experience is to make art in the narrative genre, totally autobiographical in nature, i.e. created by the artist as an account of the artist’s life. Smith (2012) describes this as “relational viewing” and suggests that, when the viewer encounters this type of autobiographical work, it “functions as a powerful catalyst for memory, whereby viewers draw upon their own life stories to connect with the work” (Smith 2012, 2). Smith

also states that “autobiographical art relies on viewers for meaning because it allows for the projection of lived experiences into the recorded history of the artist” (Smith 2012, 4).

### **Finding Connections between the Artwork and the Viewer**

The communication between artist and audience was evaluated by Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) in his book *Relational Aesthetics*. He suggests that relational esthetics characterize a “set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (Bourriaud 2002, 113). This suggests that artworks interact with and allow exchanges with the audience to address shared experiences in the world. As Janis Jefferies has written:

The possibility of a shared solace may be achieved by identification via a sense of sight and physical sensation. Each of the senses may be activated by a circuit of interwoven memories, triggered and registered by and in the body or bodies of both the artists and the viewer. (Cited in Mitchell 2000, 66)

The artwork can act as a catalyst for the viewer to remember common shared experiences or emotions and so “find a better understanding of the self” (Smith 2012, 11). This would seem to be borne out by the popularity of autobiographical memoir, particularly ones about grief. The earliest of these is probably C.S. Lewis’ *A Grief Observed* (1961). Later volumes include Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and Joyce Carol Oates’ *A Widow’s Story* (2011). Although such books have been criticized as “nouveau solipsism” or “moi-ism” (Patai cited in Miller 2000, 421), they constitute a genre that has a large readership particularly in the US. Feminist writer and memoir author Nancy Miller suggests that

“the memoir craze feeds the hunger for a different, or at least a more interesting life through literature ... however hellish the lives, told in memoir they give you ... a narrative through which to make sense of your own past” (Miller 2000, 430).

From a personal perspective, however, when I encounter work in this genre I find it difficult to relate to my own experience. I am too distracted by the differences between what happened to the artists or authors and what happened to me. It eventually becomes distanced from me to the point of irrelevance when I am unable to make any emotional connection with the work. I do draw on my own experience of grief and loss when creating my own textile artwork, but I utilize that experience in an abstract way. I use my own system of references, metaphors, and signifiers to allude to the relevant experiences I have had, thus making the work about grief and mourning but not specifically about my personal experience. For example, the use of the number seven is important in many works I have made: seven hanging sheets in the work *Seven*; seven types of mending in *Mendings II*. This number references the number of people of my acquaintance who died in a short period of time while I was making these works.

Many artists use metaphor as a way of engendering a connection or emotional response to the work without their personal narrative acting as an obstacle to the way the work is perceived. It is not uncommon for contemporary art to be not obviously open to an interpretation of being related to the artist’s own (autobiographical) experience. The affective responses to these artworks therefore do not come from identification with or sympathy for the artist, but from a “direct engagement with sensation as it is registered in the work” (Bennett 2005, 7). It is the transactive nature of artwork which I am drawing on in the creation of my artwork. Using my own personal experience of grief and loss I can inform the work and make it without recourse to direct autobiographical detail. This then serves as a catalyst for the viewer to remember their lived experience of grief and loss and to

generate affect. Deleuze uses the term “encountered sign” to describe something that is felt rather than recognized. The sensuous sign, he states, “does us violence; it mobilizes the memory, it sets the soul in motion” (Deleuze 2000, 101), and it is the sign that forces us to think.

The work of art is born from signs as much as it generates them; the creator is like the jealous man, interpreter of the god, who scrutinizes the signs in which the truth betrays itself. (Deleuze 2000, 98)

Without doubt, grief is a profoundly felt emotion, which may affect an individual for many years, sometimes to the extent of it being described as a trauma. But what is a deeply felt emotion? When feelings are described using terms such as “despair” and “sorrow” they are taken to mean a greater depth of feeling or emotional intensity than sadness or unhappiness. Similarly, the term “in” is applied to emotions to stress the severity of the feeling, for example “in mourning” or “in love.” They persist for a long time, perhaps many years and occasionally are triggered to plunge the bereaved back to their first days of mourning. If this triggering is evoked by an artwork, particularly if it is textile, the comfort derived from the viewer’s lifelong experience of textile may allow a progression in their work of mourning.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, this paper has presented the different systems and mechanisms by which an artwork can enable a connection with any unresolved mourning in the viewer and allow time to remember and reflect and progress their work of mourning, which can happen in several ways. Initially the artist draws on their own experience to imbue the work with their feelings of grief and loss, using metaphor as encountered sign in the work. This may include the utilization of their own autobiographical details and experiences to a greater or lesser degree. Once an artwork is completed, the way in which it is shown to the public in terms of the way it is hung, displayed, or exhibited – including the influence of lighting, signage, and exhibition identity – contributes to the exhibitionary affectivity of the work. The viewer then brings their own set of experiences, feelings, and emotions when they encounter the artwork and this, combined with their esthetic experience of the work, can allow the creation of a cathexis – an investment of emotional energy in the work which allows a time and space for remembering, a space between the healing process of mourning and the never-ending melancholia, when empathic engagement with the work will enable a progression in their work of mourning. As Alan Firth wrote, remembering his feelings and emotions on encountering the stitched linen piece remembering, repeating and working through (Figure 2) for the first time:

“I recognised that your large artwork filling that wall, both mirrored and addressed for me the utterly intense feelings in a small space deep within ME. I knew that “it” knew what was going on, and in no small way it acted like the Underground map, allowing me to find my “way through.” That overwhelmingly intense experience lasted for a couple of seconds ... it was as if nothing in this world existed other than the wall and me ... then came the clarity, bringing a flow of understanding. It was as if a key had been turned in a lock, and that I was going to pass through ... !” (Firth 2015).

This unsolicited response demonstrates clearly the affectivity of the textile artwork in creating a cathexis, particularly because of the use of textiles and the processes of tearing and stitching which allowed a recognizable and acknowledged progression in his work of mourning. The importance of cloth and its central role in our everyday lives means that it can be used to hold the memory of those who have died and enable us to retain our bonds with the deceased. The long association of cloth with the body during life and after death means that it is a uniquely placed medium to act as

an affective metaphor for grief and loss and be a focus for and initiator of cathexis in contemporary art practice.



Figure 2 remembering, repeating and working through. Photo credit: Beverly Ayling-Smith.

## Notes

1 Whilst the fold has been much discussed in the literature, in this context it is being considered specifically in terms of its association with comfort and care.

2 In contrast to Freud's theory that the melancholic person directs the rage against the deceased onto their own ego – an object relation – Kristeva states that the relation fails to materialize at all. No object is able to replace the mother; "no sign can express the loss, and desire fails to emerge" (Lechte 1990, 34).

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