Visual Art as a Means of Processing and Communicating the Trauma of War

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Art. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Abstract

This thesis examines how visual art can be used to both internally process trauma and communicate it to others, using post-WW2 Poland as its context. By focusing on Poland right after the war, where survivors were marked with the weight of a great tragedy with little in the way of helpful resources, the importance of any means of coping is pushed to the forefront. A clear lens of dealing with trauma emerges in the examined art practices. The works of Magdalena Abakanowicz and Alina Szapocznikow, two sculptors and Polish war survivors, are analysed trough a theoretical framework of trauma based on authors such as psychologist Bessel van der Kolk, whose research focuses on how trauma functions in the body, essayist Elaine Scarry, who writes about the inherent inexpressibility of pain, as well as other writers like Julia Kristeva, Dominick LaCapra and Jill Bennett, whose work explores the nature of trauma, making and other related topics. This thesis aims to investigate the similarities between the structure of trauma and visual art that may make art making a viable tool for healing, such as their non-verbal form and abstracted nature. Ultimately, this thesis argues that these artists' practices showcase how visual art can encompass the complexities of trauma where other methods falter, both for the artist's own understanding and their ability to communicate with a viewer.

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Introduction

Psychological trauma is notoriously difficult to capture in words. It is challenging to try to articulate an experience defined by its inexpressibility; many survivors find themselves at a loss for words when communication may be essential to their ability to heal. In post World War Two (WW2) Poland, silence fell across the nation. Survivors struggled to process what they went through during the prior six years of war: occupation, concentration camps, immense bloodshed. Discussions of the war's impact were complicated by Soviet control of the nation, which brought with it repression and an extension of the instability that began in 1939. Psychological trauma was not well understood either; though the area of study began formalising in the 19th century, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) would not become an officially recognised diagnosis until 1980. (van der Kolk, 2014, pp. 19-23) Yet diagnostic criteria did not birth trauma into existence, nor did political repression and avoidance erase it. The trauma of war has existed in the bodies and minds of survivors for as long as war has been waged between people. It is the survivors' ability to understand and heal from that trauma that is dependant on their access to proper resources and coping tools. (van der Kolk, 2014, pp. 417-428)

This thesis will examine how visual art may provide a space for that process. By analysing the work of two Polish artists who survived different circumstances during WW2 – Alina Szapocznikow and Magdalena Abakanowicz – visual art will be explored as a means for both the personal processing of trauma, as well as a way for survivors to communicate the experience to others. This thesis will aim to reason with questions about the relationship between trauma and visual art. What similarities between the two make visual art a useful tool in the healing of trauma? How does artistic abstraction help one process traumatic memory? How can an art piece successfully communicate the experience of trauma, as opposed to a verbal or written retelling? To answer these questions, multiple pieces by both Szapocznikow and Abakanowicz will be analysed through the lens of their interaction with traumatic memory.

Firstly, to properly discuss the relationship between trauma and visual art, an understanding of what trauma is and how it works will have to be achieved. Chapter

1 will focus primarily on this goal, referencing a framework of writers to explain how trauma functions in the brain. The main source for this framework is Bessel van der Kolk's 2014 book *The Body Keeps The Score,* which explains the processes behind trauma from a psychiatric viewpoint. Van der Kolk writes in depth about the structure of traumatic memory, as well as possible avenues for treatment. (van der Kolk, 2014) His work will be compared to that of Elaine Scarry, who wrote about pain's unspeakable nature and the importance of making, (Scarry, 1985), as well as Julia Kristeva's ideas of abjection. (Kristeva, 1980) By comparing these texts, the first chapter will present a coherent structure of trauma, defined by its fragmentation, inexpressibility, and the importance of making in the face of its challenges. Additionally, the second part of this chapter will further illuminate the historical and biographical context of the discussed artists' lives, necessary for the discussion of their art through the lens of trauma.

The second chapter will build on this basis by analysing how visual art may be used as a tool to process trauma. Using the examples of Abakanowicz's *Katarsis* (1985) and *Crowds III* (1989), as well as Szapocznikow's *Souvenir I* (1971), the non-linear, abstracted medium of visual art will be analysed as a possible tool for expressing the aforementioned fragmented nature of trauma. The ability for an artist to externalise their experience like this will also be compared to recounting via speech or a written account, to further showcase the strengths of visual art as a tool in healing where other options may fail. A particular focus will be placed on trauma and visual art both sharing the same sensory, emotional spaces, the potential for art to hold a plethora of meanings, and the ability of the artist to obfuscate private details.

The third chapter will follow with an exploration of visual art as a means for an artist to communicate the experience of trauma to others. By adding the ideas of empathic unsettlement (LaCapra, 2001) and affective encounters (Bennett, 2005) into the theoretical framework, Chapter 3 will contrast Szapocznikow's 1954 work *Friendship* with her 1955 *Exhumed* statue, as well as Abakanowicz's *Backs* (1976-1980). Focusing on the ways in which visual art may cause a response in the viewer through disturbance, the chapter will offer a look at how the inexpressible nature of trauma may be shared through replicating its disorienting, uncertain affect

in a viewer, while maintaining proper boundaries between them and those sharing their experience.

Chapter 1: The Trauma

What is trauma? What structures cause it to affect individuals years after the events that caused its onset, as if seemingly no time has passed? Why is it hard to voice and harder yet to heal from? Why do conventional methods of expression fail so often when applied to traumatic memory? These are the questions that need to be answered in order to analyse how visual art may serve as a way of processing and communicating trauma. To understand the necessity of visual art as a tool for coping, one must first understand what it is that those suffering from psychological trauma must cope with. To this end, this chapter will aim to explain the core mechanisms of traumatic memory and how it differs from other types of memory. By the end of this explanation, the need for tools such as visual art in the process of healing trauma should become apparent. Additionally, to understand trauma in the context of the two artists whose work will be discussed in the following chapters, the facts of their life must first be established. Both Alina Szapocznikow and Magdalena Abakanowicz were Polish WW2 survivors, and the ways in which the war affected them are crucial to the analysis of how their art practices relate to trauma. In the aftermath of WW2, a uniquely high presence of PTSD was observed in Poland. (Lis-Turlejska, Szumiał and Drapała, 2018) The knowledge of why will be valuable in discussing these artists' work within proper contexts. With a biographical and historical understanding of these artists' lives, as well as a concrete framework of psychological trauma and its effects, this chapter will lay the foundation necessary for further visual analysis of select artworks through the lens of trauma.

1.1 Brain and Body

To better understand psychological trauma, one must look at the neurological mechanisms behind it. Psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk aims to lay these mechanisms bare in his 2014 book *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma.* Van der Kolk, whose research has focused on the effects of trauma since the 1970s, argues that trauma is so overwhelming because it changes the structure of the brain, and as a result, the ability for the individual to

engage in every other aspect of life. According to van der Kolk, the goal of the brain is to “ensure our survival, even under the most miserable conditions,” (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 55) which is why when one is in danger, the brain effectively shuts off higher reasoning to focus only on survival. In most cases, when the danger has been dealt with, stress hormones and circuits slowly return to normal. One is able to pause and analyse what happened with the use of their rational brain, which is used for empathising with others, sequencing, planning, and imagining. However, if the reaction to danger is interrupted, if, for example, one is held down or trapped, unable to act to protect themselves, the typical stress response cannot be completed. The brain does not stop signalling danger. (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 54) Trauma is the brain acting as if danger is still ongoing. Ever-present. It redirects all other priorities towards survival, no matter how painful or damaging that may be in the long-term. The amygdala, a part of the brain responsible for the fight/flight/freeze instinct, releases constant stress hormones which do not allow the individual to rest or meaningfully engage in the present. Fear reactions are heightened; a small trigger may cause the already overworked system to collapse. Activity is also lowered in the rational brain, known as the neocortex, which causes one to struggle with social connection, impulse control, planning, as well as understanding cause and effect. Without a functioning neocortex, abstraction and imagining both become harder. (van der Kolk, 2014, pp. 55-65)

Another vital part of the brain changed by trauma is the thalamus. As early as 1920, the immediacy of trauma was discussed by psychoanalysts like Freud, who wrote of patients who "repeat as a current experience what is repressed, instead of, as the physician would prefer to see him do, recollecting it as a fragment of the past”. (Freud, 1920, p. 13) Many analysts note that traumatic memory seems to exist outside of the normal order of the story of one’s life. Unlike other types of memory, traumatic memory could strike one as if it was happening in the present moment, unchanged from the way it was initially experienced. Neuroscientific evidence shows that this is primarily tied to a breakdown in the thalamus, (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 81) which under usual circumstances works to synthesise sensory information such as smell, touch or sight into an understandable experience, which may then be passed on onto the amygdala and the neocortex. Trauma affects the function of the thalamus,

causing traumatic memory to avoid that process of synthetisation. This makes it be stored in the brain as a fragmented jumble of sensory inputs, rather than as a narrative organised by chronology and reason. This further complicates the ability of one to understand and communicate their trauma, as it rarely resembles the rest of their life experiences which may be more easily organised, summarised and retold. (van der Kolk, 2014, pp. 60-70)

Trauma does not happen within a singular, simple brain process, nor does it present in any one individual in only one way. A plethora of symptoms can be seen in those with trauma, from violent outbursts to numb dissociation, yet a common pattern does emerge from the aforementioned structures. Trauma rearranges an individual to focus on surviving a threat that is no longer present, in ways that may be detrimental to them in their current environment. It harms one's ability to make sense of and communicate themselves to others. Trauma exists outside of the usual spectrum of experiences one may exchange with others daily: it is overwhelming, destructive, and often unintelligible.

These qualities mirror another framework of understanding suffering: Elaine Scarry's 1985 philosophical work *The Body in Pain*. In it, Scarry argues that pain can unmake a person because of how immediate, overwhelming and incommunicable it is. Unlike other intentional emotional states, which have an intentional object, i.e. are "of" or "for" something, pain is uniquely lacking in external direction. While one can hunger for food or fear the night, one cannot be in pain "for" something. Pain is pain alone. That singularity makes it inexpressible, as an object cannot be identified with the feeling. At best, a metaphor may be utilised to approximate the experience, often by recounting the act of injury: it feels like a hammer is hitting my hand, or, this wound feels like it's burning. (Scarry, 1985, pp. 5-16) Scarry notes how this makes pain unique both in self-experience and in communication, writing: "to have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt." (Scarry, 1985, p. 7) Interestingly, when comparing Scarry's model of pain with van der Kolk's writings on trauma, an neuroscientific link emerges. Research has shown that people possess two states of self-awareness: the autobiographical, rooted in language, which allows one to present narratives about the self, and the moment-to-moment self-awareness, which allows one to feel current physical sensations. These

two systems are located in different parts of the brain; often attempting to grapple with one cuts off our ability to engage with the other. (van der Kolk, 2014, pp. 235-236) Pain can block the ability to form a coherent self-narrative. Additionally, van der Kolk found that trauma could shut down Broca's area, the speech centre of the brain. This combined with the breakdown of the neocortex sets suffering and speech as opposite experiences. (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 43) As van der Kolk notes, "All trauma is preverbal." (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 43) "Communicating fully is the opposite of being traumatised." (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 235) Here, both authors reach a shared conclusion: suffering actively disables one's ability to communicate it.

However, a difference should be noted; while van der Kolk's work focuses on psychological trauma, Scarry's framework refers rather to physical pain. Nevertheless, this should not stop one from comparing the two works. Scarry herself argues that other intentional states can near the experience of physical pain when deprived of their object, so pain can be caused by experiences other than physical injury. (Scarry, 1985, p. 5) Furthermore, it should be considered that trauma as described by van der Kolk resembles Scarry's concept of physical pain more closely than that of emotional pain, which may be more easily put into words. Trauma, like pain, is incommunicable, pre-verbal. It is an intentional state that strips away one's ability to focus on other experiences, and can cause bodily symptoms, often making it present concurrently with physical pain (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 97). Due to its non-chronological nature, trauma also exists as an immediate state, heavily associated with sensory experience in much the same way physical pain is. This can be seen in the previously discussed breakdown of the thalamus. Therefore, trauma seems to resemble Scarry's model of physical pain more closely than it does other intentional states.

Not every instance of trauma, however, resembles the immediacy of physical pain as closely. While a PTSD flashback carries the same overwhelming immediacy, another common presentation of trauma involves dissociation, a disconnection from the present experience. This does not mean that the visceral pain is absent, but that rather, overwhelmed by its intensity, the brain shuts down to protect itself, turning to denial and a lack of feeling. "Dissociation means simultaneously knowing and not knowing," writes van der Kolk. (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 121) Here, another key text

mirrors the framework of trauma: Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.* (1980) Building on the psychoanalytical work of Freud and Lacan, Kristeva presents the reader with the concept of the abject, something that exists between the subject, the self, and the object, the other. The abject, Kristeva poses, disgusts and frightens the self, and must therefore be rejected to maintain order. The abject, like trauma, exists on the borderline of life and death, self and other, and therefore causes horror in the subject. Kristeva lists a child drinking the skin of milk as an early revolting example of the abject. Later examples include corpses, immorality, betrayal, feces, and the following experience describing the author's visit to "the museum that is now what remains of Auschwitz":

> I see a heap of children's shoes, or something like that, something I have already seen elsewhere, under a Christmas tree, for instance, dolls I believe. The abjection of Nazi crime reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things. (Kristeva, 1980, p. 4)

It is not the viscera or the brutality itself that defines the abject, but rather the disturbance of identity and order, a borderline that refutes an otherwise clean structure of what is what. The abject must be rejected to maintain the self, and yet it remains, leering from the in-between space it occupies. Kristeva's framework mirrors that of trauma and dissociation. Psychotherapist Richard Schwartz notes a similar occurrence in his Internal Family Systems (IFS) model of trauma: he posits that trauma may cause the brain to reject the "part" that suffered it, as the painful experience becomes inordinately linked with its naturally valuable state. For example, an adult who suffered abuse as a child may subconsciously link the event with the innocence, trust and creativity they exemplified at the time, and reject these traits along with the trauma. (Schwartz, 2001) These parts, referred to as exiles, resemble the abject, existing on the borderline of innocence and brutality. Comparing the rejection of the abject to the rejection of trauma present in dissociation, it becomes evident that dissociation does not equal the lack of an immediate, intentional state of pain, but is rather an attempt at numbing oneself to a part that even through rejection, cannot be eliminated.

Through the explanation of these structures and processes, it becomes apparent why trauma is an overwhelming force that defies understanding and explanation.

From the immediate intentional state that breaks down all other focus and language, to pain that cannot be withstood, and must therefore be rejected, trauma restructures the brain in ways that reinforce its continuation. The traumatised individual struggles to understand what is happening to them, and cannot easily communicate it to others to receive the support and empathetic understanding they need to recover. It may therefore seem that the destructive nature of trauma is unending and unchangeable, yet that is not the conclusion that any of the aforementioned authors arrive at in their prospective works.

Elaine Scarry argues that the unmaking nature of pain can be matched with its opposite: making. If pain is an intentional state with no intentional object, then imagination is an intentional object with no experienceable intentional state, wholly the matter of what one pictures. This, according to Scarry, makes pain and imagination the two boundary extremes of the human psyche; two sides of one coin. (Scarry, 1985, pp. 161-170) Consequently, Scarry posits that imagination and making are the path forward through which people can deal with pain's unmaking nature. Where pain destroys and collapses, imagination may be used to rebuild and create meaning. Making can objectify the objectless state of pain, externalising it into a form that may be understood. Scarry explains the inversion of the external and internal as such:

> "By transporting the external object world into the sentient interior, that interior gains some small share of the blissful immunity of inert inanimate objecthood; and conversely, by transporting pain out into the external world, that external environment is deprived of its immunity to, unmindfulness of, and indifference towards the problems of sentience." (Scarry, 1985, p. 285)

Making inverts the experience of pain, externalising it so it may be communicated, and nullifying some of the inner suffering. The psychological research of Bessel van der Kolk presents a similar analysis. He writes, "Imagination is absolutely critical to the quality of our lives. […] Without imagination there is no hope, no chance to envision a better future, no place to go, no goal to reach." (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 17) Van der Kolk argues that to exit the pathways established by trauma, one must be able to imagine a life beyond them. In fact, the majority of the possible therapies for PTSD discussed in *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014) depend on the individual's ability to conceptualise and imagine abstract ideas, whether

through theatre, dance, music, or visualisations. These methods, which go beyond language-based retellings and talk therapy, make use of the neuroplasticity of the brain, the ability to change and reorganise its structure, to propel traumatised individuals towards the same concept discussed by Scarry: a creative way to understand and communicate something fractured and unspoken.

Kristeva also discusses the importance of ritual and creation when faced with the abject. The abject can be found in literature, for example, as the medium blurs the line between identities and holds the author's and the readers' "most intimate and most serious apocalypses." (Kristeva, 1980, p. 207) There, the abject may be unveiled and interacted with, may take the place of the sacred and face the viewer with its full might; where in other circumstances, one is tempted to turn away from the abject and ignore its existence, lest it destroy the very order their identity is based on. Trauma is a facet of the abject, and like it, is often thought better ignored so that it does not shake the structures both individuals and societies build their identities on. Yet, like the abject, trauma cries out to be faced. Psychoanalysts like van der Kolk and Schwartz go beyond Kristeva's idea of facing the abject; in their frameworks, trauma must not only be recognised, but reintegrated, given a space in the individual's understanding of the self. Likewise, societies must recognise their faults and failures in ignoring trauma; only from there on can healing begin to take place. (van der Kolk, 2014) (Schwartz, 2001)

The recurring connection between imagination and one's ability to heal showcases the value of visual art as a tool for coping with trauma. Not only does it allow one to partake in the necessary ritual of making, which can help objectify and externalise their pain into an understandable form, but it also engages more abstract, visual parts of the brain rather than the verbal and logical ones which have been demonstrated to shut down under the influence of trauma. Visual art can allow one to externalise the parts of themselves that they feel they need to reject to survive, without letting those parts be forgotten. It forms a situation in which one may safely unveil the abject for both themselves and others. As will be shown in the upcoming chapters, visual art forms a double opportunity for the examination for trauma: one for the artist to process their internal, intelligible experiences, and another for the viewer to understand what was previously incommunicable.

1.2 Poland and the War

After the previous explanation of the processes of trauma, one may reasonably wonder how visual art as a coping tool relates to the artworks that will be discussed in the following chapters. To understand that, one should look at both the greater context of the historical period the artists lived in, as well as the details of their personal lives. It will likely not come as a surprise to anyone that WW2 imbedded trauma into its survivors; one of the prior quotes of Kristeva explaining the concept of the abject references the horrors of the Auschwitz concentration camps and how difficult they are to face. Any war brings trauma with it, and the period of WW2 in Poland that both Szapocznikow and Abakanowicz lived through was particularly heinous. While it cannot be said with certainty that either artist had PTSD, or that they would identify with the general terminology of trauma, the war certainly affected them in some way. It would be difficult to find a person who lived through what they did that carried with them no aftereffects.

Poland's invasion by Nazi Germany in 1939 is generally considered to be the start of WW2. In a little over a month, the country was annexed, divided between Germany and the USSR. Mass arrests, forced labor and executions followed; ghettos were established to trap the Jewish population. Over the course of the war, over 450 concentration and labor camp complexes were built in German-occupied Poland. It is estimated that around 5 million Polish citizens, including Polish Jews, went through these camps. Uprisings often ended in retaliatory killings and destruction. The 1944 Warsaw Uprising was answered with the city being razed to the ground; the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was ended by the Nazis destroying the ghetto block by block. Both events were marked with high casualty numbers. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.) The Holocaust occurred largely on Polish soil; all of the killing centres dedicated to the murder of the Jewish people were located in German-occupied Poland. Of the six million Jewish people killed, half were Polish citizens. Ninety percent of Poland's Jewish population, and around twenty percent of the total pre-war population, were lost during the war. (Grabowski, 2009) The toll taken by the war was unimaginable.

A 2018 study found that the probable rates of PTSD among Polish WW2 survivors were around 38%, a rate significantly higher than that of other involved countries, which measured around 4-13%. (Lis-Turlejska, Szumiał and Drapała, 2018) The authors of the paper contribute this to multiple factors: one, as aforementioned, the situation in Poland was particularly bad, with constant bloodshed. Another significant factor was the political situation in Poland after the end of the war, which likely negatively impacted the survivors' ability to heal. After the war, Poland fell under USSR control, essentially functioning as a Soviet satellite state. Post-war border shifts displaced roughly a million people, and the ensuing decades were marred by repression and persecution. The NKVD and UB secret police forces arrested, tortured and murdered over a hundred thousand Poles. (Applebaum, 2012) Poverty and paranoia did not leave many avenues for dealing with trauma. While Stalin's death brought some temporary liberalisation in 1953, Soviet control over Poland did not end until 1989, when the political party Solidarity took power and formally amended the constitution to restore civil liberties. (Millard, 1994) This period of fear and instability extended the terror of the war by another 44 years. It is therefore unsurprising that the population of Poland struggled to process and assimilate the trauma of the war. Referencing back to *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), one can see that the repeated signalling of danger occurring in this period of oppression, coupled with limited access to help or community support, would reinforce the neural pathways created by the initial trauma. Those affected would be left with a pain torn from the chronology of their lives: incommunicable, visceral, and ever-present, with little opportunity to soothe it.

Szapocznikow and Abakanowicz had different experiences of the war. Abakanowicz was born into an aristocratic family in 1930 and raised in the countryside near Warsaw. As a child, she often drew pictures in mud with a stick. She was nine when the war started. In 1943, she witnessed a man shoot her mother, severing her arm. A year later, the encroaching battlefront made the family flee, abandoning their home. Abakanowicz was in Warsaw at the time of the brutal uprising in 1944, where the Nazi burn squad was sent to raze the city to the ground. At fourteen, she helped take care of the wounded, and was separated from her mother for two months. 93% of dwellings in Warsaw were destroyed by 1945, when the war

Fig 1. Photograph of Magdalena Abakanowicz, 1960s.

Fig 2. Photograph of Alina Szapocznikow, year unknown.

ended and the new Communist authorities came into power. To avoid being persecuted as class enemies, Abakanowicz's family moved to the small town of Tczew to live anonymously. Later on, Abakanowicz pretended to be the daughter of a clerk to apply to the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts. She made a plethora of works and exhibited all around the world, though she continued living in Warsaw until her death in 2017. (Rose, 1994, pp. 7-19)

Alina Szapocznikow was born in 1926 to a Polish Jewish family, making her thirteen at the start of WW2. Her father died of tuberculosis only a year earlier, and her brother went missing in 1939 in the early stages of the war. She was placed in a ghetto with her mother, a restricted area to which the Nazis confined the Jewish populace. The conditions in the ghettos were difficult, with starvation and disease being commonplace. The two worked as a doctor and a nurse there for two years before they were moved to a concentration camp. They would pass through multiple camps before being separated in 1944. After the war, Szapocznikow travelled to Prague with a group of prisoners, while her mother returned to Poland. Szapocznikow would spend the rest of the 1940s between Prague and Paris. Around this time, she almost died of tuberculosis, surviving only thanks to an experimental treatment. At the start of the 1950s, she returned to Poland, where she worked with an unyielding ambition, creating a multitude of works. In 1968, she was diagnosed

with breast cancer, of which she would eventually pass from in 1973. (Jakubowska, 2008)

Though both women lived through WW2, their experiences differ. Abakanowicz witnessed the destruction of the Warsaw Uprising, while Szapocznikow survived ghettos and concentration camps. After the war, Abakanowicz wrote and spoke about her trauma, while Szapocznikow avoided discussing the subject. Both artists worked as nurses, taking care of wounded bodies. Both had to leave their homes. Both witnessed death and suffering. With the known prevalence of trauma at the time, one can see how easily both women could have been affected by it based on what they lived through. Both would also end up working with figurative sculpture after witnessing the destruction of bodies during the war. Thinking back to the structure of trauma, one could argue that the process of art making may have allowed them to externalise what was happening to them internally. In some ways, the art they created could have been therapeutic, could have allowed for the parts of their experience that remained unspoken, that were difficult to verbalise, to be given form. With both the context of their lives, and an understanding of how trauma affects its bearers, the basis of analysing how their art practices may relate to trauma is formed. The next chapter will focus on visual art specifically as a method of private, internal processing for the artist. Following the arc of healing itself, from the internal to the external, exploring how art making may allow for internal processing will also lay out the understanding necessary for the third chapter, which will focus on the external communication of trauma through art.

Chapter 2: The Self

As aforementioned, trauma is difficult to understand. This holds true for societies, those who have never experienced trauma, as well as those that deal with it on the daily. When most of the understanding of human experience is based around language and stories, pre-verbal trauma can seem like an incomprehensible shard stuck at the centre of pieces that would otherwise fit. As stated by both Scarry and van der Kolk, pain and trauma are almost impossible to put into words. One cannot process trauma in the same way they might other emotions, because trauma escapes words and narratives. That is why visual art may be a valuable tool for processing one's trauma. Where words fail, art can flourish. Visual art may also be considered to be preverbal. Often, it avoids straightforward narratives and words in favour of imagery and abstraction. Visual art can provoke an emotional reaction that functions on a different level than words do, and thus mirrors the structure of trauma. Like some visualisation therapies discussed by van der Kolk, art can allow those dealing with trauma to externalise their experience into a space that does not necessitate the use of the parts of the brain shut down by trauma. Instead, it allows the artists to take control of the spatial and emotional brain areas that trauma exists inside of, and therefore produce something that reflects their experience. The sensory, immediate nature of trauma ceases to be a hurdle to understanding, as it can be with strictly chronological narrative retellings, and instead dictates an appropriate medium through which processing may occur. In this chapter, multiple works by Szapocznikow and Abakanowicz will be used as examples of this possible process of coping, whereby the externalisation of trauma into the sensory, emotional medium of visual art may ease the processing of the artist's experience.

Abakanowicz herself references the idea of art making as an emotional release in her 1985 work *Katarsis* (Fig 3 and 4), a precursor to her later well-known *Crowds* series. The piece, developed for collector Giuliano Gori's Villa Celle in Santomato di Pistoia in Tuscany, is made up of thirty-three hollow bronze cast figures lined up in rows. Headless and armless, the figures are all simplified, with each differing slightly from the other. Barbara Rose, writing about Abakanowicz's work, posits that for the

artist, the creation of the piece was a “trancelike concentration”. (Rose, 1994, p. 101)

Abakanowicz herself said of the work:

> Katarsis—the decision came abruptly, in the way that excess must boil over. I seemed to be an onlooker, astonished by what was growing inside of me. Removed outside it swelled and took on force and personality. I felt oneness with the forms that were arising. I was happy in that unity. (Rose, 1994, p. 101)

Fig 3. Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Katarsis*, bronze, 1985

Fig 4. Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Katarsis*, bronze, 1985

Aptly, Abakanowicz titled the piece after the Greek word katharsis, meaning "purification" or "cleansing". The idea of katharsis as an expulsion of negative emotions was first coined by Aristotle, who used it in reference to dramaturgy. Through imitating a real tragedy, a play could arouse pity and fear in the viewer, and thus allow them to cleanse such feelings from their body. The term was later used in Freudian psychoanalysis, where catharsis referred to uncovering one's repressed trauma to confront it. (Turri, 2014) By titling the work as such, Abakanowicz forms a direct link between the piece and the expulsion of negative emotions, as well as facing one's trauma. Interestingly, Abakanowicz's *Katarsis* seems not to refer to the cleansing of an audience presented with a tragedy, as it does in Aristotle's definition, but rather to that of the artist herself, who externalises an internal process and may thus face it. There is certainly a traumatic aspect visible in *Katarsis.* The simplified bodies stand armless and headless, a distance apart from each other in a field. From a distance, they look like unkempt graves. This disheveled appearance was intentional on the artist's part. From the whole polished park, she chose to present her work in a "scrubby piece of poor land […] fenced by a stone wall and barbed wire." (Rose, 1994, p. 100) Abakanowicz also left a raw patina on the sculptures, so they would become weathered by the elements. (Rose, 1994, p. 104) A clear similarity appears here to Kristeva's idea of the abject. As previously mentioned, the abject is something that must be expelled from the self in order to regain order. Existing between object and subject, it disturbs and frightens. (Kristeva, 1980) The way in which Abakanowicz describes the process of making is similar: something rises inside her and must be expelled, lest it boils over. The area and form of the piece are also abject in nature, with the cut-off bodies being placed right near the borderline of the park in an unkempt area. The most noticeable difference from Kristeva's idea of the abject can be found in Abakanowicz's report about her experience making *Katarsis*. Facing the expelled excess does not bring about disgust, but rather unity and joy. Indeed, for an artist externalising their experience, the resulting abject work may not be a disturbing sight, but rather a familiar comfort. Traumatised individuals are often comforted by what others find disturbing, because it is what their bodies deem most familiar. (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 36-18)

Van der Kolk also writes about how externalising trauma may be an effective method of healing. Through projecting the inner world onto three dimensional spaces, one may see more clearly what is occurring inside of their mind. Therapies that involve externalising or visualising the trauma into a physical space allow the person to primarily engage with their right brain, which is more involved in the spatial, emotional and nonverbal processes prevalent in trauma. Therefore, the experience does not have to be translated into the ordered form it resists. (van der Kolk, 2014, pp. 296-300) This way of approaching trauma mirrors Abakanowicz's description of making *Katarsis,* and explains the catharsis offered by facing the finished work.

Abakanowicz followed *Katarsis* with the *Crowds* series, starting in 1986. She worked on the series for the following five years, creating four different iterations of groups of 50-60 burlap-resin humanoid forms. Again, all of the figures were made headless; in *Crowd III* they also appear armless, with simplified shapes similarly to the bodies included in *Katarsis*. With *Crowds,* the artist produced more figures, more closely clumped together.

Fig 5. Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Crowd III* (50 figures), burlap and resin, 1989.

Crowd III was originally exhibited during the artist's first show at the Marlborough Gallery in New York in 1989, exactly fifty years after the beginning of WW2, the same year that Poland broke free of Soviet control. Abakanowicz commented on this link while explaining the use of crowds in her work:

> It happened to me to live in times which were extraordinary by their various forms of collective hate and adulation. (…) I was obsessed by the image of the crowd, manipulated like a brainless organism and acting like a brainless organism. (Rose, 1994, p. 180)

Fig 6. Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Crowd III* (50 figures), burlap and resin, 1989.

Speaking of her own fear of crowds, the artist called them "the most cruel." (Rose, 1994, p. 128) Based on the clear evolution of this work from *Katarsis,* as well as statements from the artist linking these crowds to ones she experienced during events in WW2, the piece can easily be viewed as an exploration of trauma. Particularly, Abakanowicz seems to reflect on the dehumanisation of masses she witnessed. This offers the possibility of multiple interpretations of the work. Like

Katarsis, the crowds could be an externalised experience, and thus be seen as victims of war, yet they could also stand in for the danger of perpetrators. This ability of an art work to hold a plethora of paradoxical possible meanings resembles the way trauma may consist of multiple contradicting experiences jumbled together into one.

As with *Katarsis,* each of the fifty figures that make up *Crowd III* is similar, but not identical. Headless, hollow, and armless, the figures are made out of a coarse linen burlap soaked through with resin. The material does not fully resemble skin, as the coarseness of the burlap combined with the resin make it take on a weathered, wrinkly quality, more like a preserved corpse than a living person. Abakanowicz herself likened it to the shed skin of a snake. (Sznajder, 2021) Like shed skin, the figures are hollow shells. Each of the fifty are around the size of an adult and genderless. Some feature crevices in the centre of the torso that resemble wounds or orifices where the shadow covers them, reminding the viewer of the emptiness of the forms.

It is hard not to think of the artist's past when viewing *Crowd III.* Firstly, their hollowness clearly mirrors how Abakanowicz described her emotional state during the war: "I felt increasingly hollow. As if my insides had been removed and the exterior, unsupported by anything, shrank, losing its shape." (Abakanowicz, 2005) Secondly, as Abakanowicz mentioned, the crowd is an important image in her recollection of the times she lived through. In her recounting of the Warsaw Uprising, which she lived through at fourteen, the artist mentions crowds a multitude of times. While describing being separated from her mother during gunfire, she says: "Suddenly I was alone in a crowd of people. Strange faces." (Abakanowicz, 2005) Speaking about working in a makeshift hospital, she describes: "Too many damaged people. A crowd." Continuing on, Abakanowicz describes different victims she saw, such as a boy with his face burned off, and another with his limbs severed by shrapnel. (Rose, 1994, p. 11) These experiences directly mirror the figures in *Crowd III:* a herd of damaged bodies, faceless, amputated, hollow, as Abakanowicz herself felt, stood impotent without agency. Made out of wrinkled sacks, which the artist describes as "dirty, tattered" and with "their own history" (Abakanowicz, 2005), the figures appear injured. They do not posses the smooth, polished surface a viewer

may expect of a statue. Their tattered flesh resembles physical injury, while their hollow insides mirror how the artist described her own emotional state.

At the same time, Abakanowicz's description of the crowd as a brainless, cruel mob implies a more predatory reading of the figures in *Crowd III.* Karol Sienkiewicz, a writer for Culture.pl, describes the experience of walking amongst the figures as provoking "anxiety or even a sense of danger" (Sienkiewicz, 2009) Headless, the crowd could also represent the aforementioned brainlessness Abakanowicz saw in the mobs happily following authoritarian tyrants. In fact, Abakanowicz's accounts of this period also often mention how crowds presented danger and harm to her: "youngsters in brown shirts from the neighbouring country who so worshiped their leader" (Rose, 1994, p.10) "armed groups, among them partisans and ordinary bandits", and her own countrymen long after, when "grasping ambitions (…) started to hatch. Hand-to-hand fighting has begun, each against each." (Rose, 1994, p.180) Virtually each memory of the war and its aftermath that Abakanowicz shares shares this theme of crowds as terrifying masses of bodies, whether they are attacking or fleeing. Subsequently, it becomes hard for one not to link these persevering flashes of imagery, a staple of traumatic memory, with the creation of the piece.

Crowd III presents a multitude of possible meanings that seem to contradict each other. The crowd is both victim and perpetrator. Their hollowness and coarseness mirror both the physical injuries of the uprising, as well as the artist's emotional state when being forced to flee her home. There is no one concrete event being portrayed in *Crowd III*, but rather, an amalgamation of Abakanowicz's experiences with crowds during and after the war. This mirrors the way trauma works in the brain. As van der Kolk points out, because of the impairment of the hippocampus, traumatic memory does not integrate into one chronological narrative which one may easily divide up. Instead, it remains a chaos of raw flashes, sensations and immediate fear. There is no then and now when it comes to trauma. (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 81) The paradoxical multitude of meanings encompassed in *Crowd III* serves as an accurate externalisation of trauma. Rather than showcasing a chronological order of events, each separate from one another, the physical amalgamation of each element Abakanowicz recounted – crowds, missing faces,

amputated limbs, hollowness, fear, perpetrators, victims – synthesises the immediate experience of unordered flashes of trauma into one piece. By combining the elements of trauma into a piece that resembles it, rather than one reordering the initial events into a structured retelling, the artist may more easily engage with the process of externalising and facing the trauma described by van der Kolk. The art work succeeds as a tool by not flattening the complexities of the experience of trauma.

The analysis of Abakanowicz' work in the context of her personal trauma is made easier by the artist's own autobiographical writings. Abakanowicz often publicly linked her own experiences to the art she made; interviews detailing her life are easy to find. In contrast, Alina Szapocznikow, the other artist whose work will be explored in these two chapters, rarely spoke of her own life, especially in regards to her own war experience. Aleksander Wojciechowski, an art historian, critic, and friend of Szapocznikow, said about the artist:

> I really wanted to find out more about her time in the Nazi camp at Oświęcim, which she never spoke about. It was a taboo subject for her […]. She almost obsessively avoided talking about it. (Grabski, 2004)

Abakanowicz's ability to speak about what she experienced is rare amongst traumatised individuals. Many people who go through trauma struggle to speak about it even decades later, especially if they lack the proper resources necessary to heal. Many, like Szapocznikow, bury and avoid the experience to cope. Some of the only available references to Szapocznikow's wartime experiences appear in her letters to Ryszard Stanisławski, a close friend to whom she would later be married to. In 1949, the artist wrote to him:

> You look at some things so nicely, so civilly, so politely, like it should be, and maybe sometimes I envy you that. But the difference is that during your formative years, during the last 10 years, you did not go through this baptism of despair, all of this, that everything did not end for you several times over without anything left, like it did for me in the ghettos and the camps. […] Forgive me, I'm ashamed of this. You know how I cannot stand, how disgusted I am by the people who rub it in your face, or "boast" about the years of torment that they survived. (Jakubowska, 2008, p. 97)

Szapocznikow notes the effects the ghettos and the camps had on her. That "baptism of despair" took away her ability to look at things as they "should be" seen. The horrors of the Holocaust were often described as such by survivors; that afterwards, the expected, "correct" way of viewing the world no longer remained

possible. The tragedy could not be considered or depicted within accepted conventions. (Rosenfeld, 1988) Szapocznikow recognises the trauma left by the war, but at the same time she feels shame over potentially boasting about her survival. Knowing that Szapocznikow refused to speak about what happened to her, combined with this letter, makes it clear that discussing her experience brought on feelings of shame and revulsion. The specific horrors of the concentration camps exacerbated what was already true of trauma: the aforementioned unspeakableness of the experience. Though Szapocznikow made multiple artworks related to the war, she did not reference her personal experience until 1969, four years before her death, when she began working on *Souvenir I*.

It was likely Szapocznikow's poor health at the time that prompted her to look back at her time in the camps. In 1968, a year before beginning work on the piece, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Author Agata Jakubowska makes this very argument, referencing a letter written by Szapocznikow to Stanisławski years earlier, while Szapocznikow was in a hospital sick with tuberculosis. The artist wrote:

> I never knew that dying was so hard. In the camp people dropped like flies. They had no time to die slowly. A woman on the other side of the ward struggled all night to die. She, perhaps, was no longer herself, as those terrible noises and howls were already inhuman, and in the darkness they awoke all the (seemingly forgotten) worst nightmares of the camp and the inhuman humiliations of war. (Jakubowska, 2008, p. 207)

Jakubowska theorises that after her cancer diagnosis, Szapocznikow once again underwent a similar psychological process. Her sudden proximity to death and pain brought on the seemingly buried memories of the concentration camps and the war. (Jakubowska, 2008, p. 207) As previously discussed, dissociation is a common way for survivors to deal with their trauma. Nevertheless, it does not rid them of it: the trauma is likely to return in fits and starts when the fragmented memories of the event are mirrored in daily life, whether through smell, touch, or sound. (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 144) Szapocznikow's avoidance of her trauma could have likely been a form of dissociation; the sudden resurgence of memories in the hospital would have likely brought the trauma to the forefront of her awareness, leading to a more active processing of the past during times of illness.

Indeed, in the five years between Szapocznikow's cancer diagnosis and death, her work focused primarily on the impermanence of the body and death, both in the context of the disease and the past traumas of her life. Her practice became personal in ways it had never been before. It is likely that the pieces she made at this time gave her the space to process the storm of feelings raised by the illness. She said of her work, "I try to fix the fleeting moments of life, its paradoxes and its absurdity." (Filipovic and Mytkowska, 2012) The paradoxical nature of trauma came up often in her late practice. Margot Norton described Szapocznikow's sculptures as "corporeal fragments that embody, or perhaps even exorcize suffering." (Norton, 2020) Though even in this period, Szapocznikow did not speak of what happened to her in the past, the focus on trauma in her art is evident. Likely, the medium of visual art offered the kind of abstraction that broke through the unspeakableness of trauma.

Fig 7. Photograph of Szapocznikow on her father's shoulders during a seaside vacation, mid 1930s.

Fig 8. Photo collage made by Szapocznikow in preparation for *Souvenir I,* 1969

In 1969, the artist made a photo collage that would later serve as the basis for the piece titled *Souvenir I,* as seen in Fig. 8. For this work, Szapocznikow used an actual photograph of herself as a child from before the war (Fig. 7). In the original

photograph, young Szapocznikow is happily posing on her father's shoulders in front of the sea during a vacation trip. Jakubowska notes that the origin of the picture is known to us due to research that has so far been conducted, which would suggest Szapocznikow herself may not have publicised this choice. (Jakubowska, 2008, p. 208) A certain safety and vulnerability contrast each other here; the artist may use a piece of her past, a proof of pain, but through transforming it, obfuscate it from the viewer. An artwork is afforded a presumption of mystery not usually extended to verbal or written autobiographical recollections, which are expected to be more concretely factual. This likely eases the ability for one to express their traumas through visual art, as an experience may be captured in a way that evades explicit confessions the artist may not be comfortable with. In this way, a publicly viewed artwork may hold a private truth invisible to anyone but the artist; through abstraction and transformation, the artist can choose how much of themselves they show to the viewer. This allows for the artist to benefit from the act of sharing their experience publicly, while maintaining control over what is revealed, and what remains only as a part of private processing.

In the photo collage, Szapocznikow has removed her father's face and imposed an image of the starved body of a woman directly under the little girl. Jakubowska notes that the exclusion of the father is unsurprising, mainly due to the fact he died of tuberculosis before the war. (Jakubowska, 2008, p. 209) Yet it would also be important to note that this is not the only childhood picture saved in the archival collection for the process of this piece.

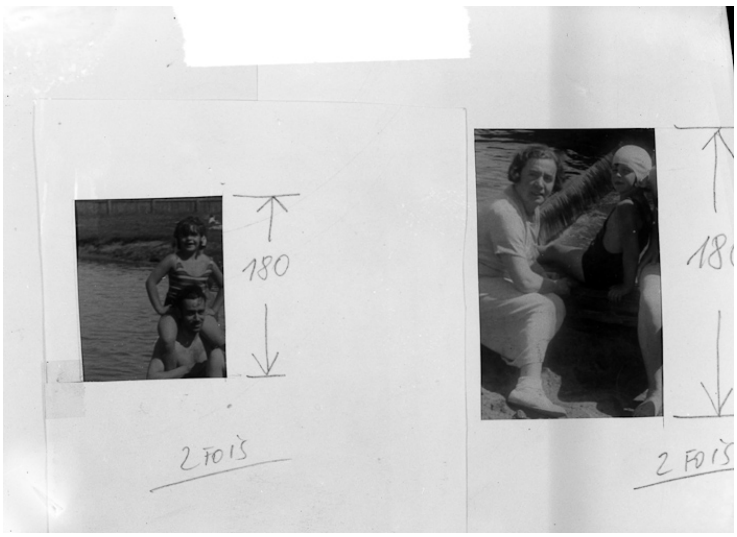

Fig 9. Photographs from the *Souvenir I* archival collection.

Another photo, likely from the same vacation, appears next to the one Szapocznikow chose for the collage. Szapocznikow could have chosen to use a different photograph, yet she purposefully includes and later excludes her father from the composition. She does not erase him in a way that hides his existence; his face is covered with an abstract cutout that differentiates itself from the background. The artist also places her child self's legs hanging partly over the scene of the victim, evoking the image of a child on a parent's shoulders; only the parental figure is missing, cut out. The visible absence thematically shows a lack of protection extended to the child, leaving her vulnerable to the fate of the victim imposed below. The fact that Szapocznikow's father died of the same disease that first brought back her memories of the camps adds an additional context to his part in the photo collage. His erasure may come from Szapocznikow considering the interconnection of trauma at that point of her life: disease, loss, war, death. Again, traumatic memory is not bound by chronology. Through the lens of trauma, it is likely that all of these fragmented moments seemed to exist together as pieces outside of the otherwise reasonable narrative of life.

Fig 10. Alina Szapocznikow, *Souvenir I,* photo collage cast in resin, 1971

Fig 11. Alina Szapocznikow, *Souvenir I,* photo collage cast in resin, 1971 (later photograph)

Interestingly, the visible absence of the father is almost entirely gone from *Souvenir I* (Fig 10 and 11) itself, the piece that Szapocznikow eventually used this photo collage in. This is the piece that Szapocznikow publicly exhibited, as opposed to the initial collage. In *Souvenir I*, the collage is changed and cast in resin. The composition appears more distorted: the victim-woman is repeated thrice, and the resin bends around her, seemingly protruding from the page. The young Szapocznikow takes up more of the composition. She is the only easily readable part of the image. The father is almost completely covered up by one of the copies of the victim-woman's face. This relates back to the idea of obfuscation and the control it gives the artist. Szapocznikow chooses to show less in the final, publicly exhibited version of the piece, yet that does not erase the process through which the piece came to be. It is in the process of making that certain elements may be privately explored, and if needed, later hidden. This is particularly useful for those unwilling to publicly share their experience, such as Szapocznikow, who may feel shame if they were to try and present their experience in a more straightforward manner.

Additionally, Jakubowska argues that the removal of the father also makes for a clearer contrast between the victim and the child, which serves as the main point of the piece. The victim is either dead or dying, starved, likely laying among other bodies. In contrast, the child is beaming, smiling, with her hands at her sides in a pose of confidence. (Jakubowska, 2008, p. 209) Jakubowska notes that the contrast is likely to make the viewer consider the victim-woman's fate as a "potential end to Szapocznikow's story" and a "tool to speak about what the artist herself survived." (Jakubowska, 2008, p. 211) Moreover, in contrast to the original photo collage, the child and the victim-women seem more separate in *Souvenir I*. While the young girl resembles a normal flat photograph, the tortured faces jump out at the viewer. Even the original imposition of the victim-woman is now bent out of proportion due to the paper crinkling up. The child and the victim no longer seem like they are occupying the same physical space. Rather, the copies of the victim begin to resemble ghosts or visions imposed onto the scene the child occupies. This would support Jakubowska's point that the contrast between the two is meant to elicit an abstract representation of what Szapocznikow survived. Curiously, the repeated presence of the victim-woman resembles the description of trauma provided by van der Kolk. The copies appear as

fragmented, invasive flashes that seem to jump out at the viewer, disconnected from both the given moment and a larger chronological narrative. In that way, they may reflect not only the traumatic event itself, but also how the artist experienced traumatic memory in its aftermath; how, like she wrote in her letter, it came on suddenly in the night in the hospital, awoken by the wails of another dying woman.

The other manner in which *Souvenir I* and its proceeding collage seem to grapple with the confrontation of trauma is the inexpressible contrast of a before and after state. The works do not tell a chronological story of a pre-war, war and post-war experience following each other, but rather juxtapose Szapocznikow's before state with the photo of another victimised woman from the camps. That juxtaposition evokes the feeling of a loss and a collapse, what Szapocznikow called her "baptism of despair", without utilising a chronological narrative. The method of collage employed by Szapocznikow allows for the simultaneous existence of both of these states, the trauma and the innocence, that the ordered nature of speech would not allow for. Though the viewer's eye may be lead around a piece in a specific order, and drawn to focal points, visual art does not need to have elements that necessarily neatly follow each other. In contrast, a sentence must always be spoken word after word, and is usually meant to convey a clear message. Additionally, through the externalisation of the inner process into a visual form, the artist may synthesise their emotional experience without being expected to communicate specific details or a conclusion, which may be expected from a spoken or written retelling. The process of art making can itself prove therapeutic. As seen with *Souvenir I* and its proceeding collage, Szapocznikow went trough a few stages of changing the collage. An artwork may be worked on slowly, privately, may be obfuscated where it begins to seem to revealing. The experimentation of art making allows for more freedom than trying to clearly structure a narrative or an explanation.

Visual art as a medium has a few distinct advantages over other forms of coping with trauma. By engaging the spatial, emotional parts of the brain, rather than those involved in storytelling and sorting, it allows for the artist to engage with trauma in a form best suited for it. The fragmented, sensory nature of trauma does not need to be translated into a chronological narrative form, but rather can be interacted with in a similar manner as it appears in the body. Because visual art is

inherently non-sequential, it can help the artist externalise the paradoxical jumble of trauma into a form that may be viewed out in the world, that may allow for clearer processing, all the while allowing for truths too vulnerable to be obfuscated in the process of abstraction. In the next chapter, these advantages of visual art as a medium for exploring trauma will be looked at not in the context of the internal, personal processing, but in how they may be used to communicate trauma to an external viewer.

Chapter 3: The Other

Moving forward from the discussion of visual art as a means of privately processing a trauma, one may note a progression of perspective that aligns with the process of art's existence itself. While the preceding analysis of visual art as a means of processing the artist's own trauma focused mostly on process, on the making itself, Chapter 3 will move out of the artist's studio into the public sphere, where visual art exists primarily in relation to its viewers. As Bessel van der Kolk said:

> Nobody wants to remember trauma. In that regard, society is no different from the victims themselves. We all want to live in a world that is safe, manageable, and predictable, and victims remind us that that is not always the case. (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 194)

Thus, communicating trauma and processing it internally share multiple challenges: both have to break through a natural human avoidance of difficult subjects, and then engage with an idea that defies representation. Trauma is non-narrative, fragmented, and largely based in sensory experience. As aforementioned, visual art can ease the process of engaging with trauma, given its a medium not based on chronological storytelling, but rather a similarly fragmented state. Yet using it to communicate traumatic memory to others involves an additional slew of challenges. The main difference between visual art as processing versus communicating trauma is the presence of pre-existing trauma in the body. An artist utilising making to sort through their trauma has already experienced the confusing, fragmented nature of traumatic memory; a viewer engaging with the resulting piece may have not. Scarry posits that the act of making creates an object that not only externalises sentience, but through its physical existence, enters the world of others, allowing them to perceive and engage with what was previously invisible to them. (Scarry, 1985, pp. 175-176) Yet making by itself may not be enough to sufficiently communicate the nature of trauma. That is where the frameworks of empathic communication will become important in the upcoming analysis; referencing authors such as Dominick LaCapra and Jill Bennett, the importance of a viewer being met with discomfort and a sensory, emotional impact will be discussed in relation to properly conveying to them the experience of trauma. Rather than relying on exact facts or uplifting narratives, an emphasis should be placed on the work creating an

affective experience for the viewer, i.e. one engaging the affect, the experienced state of one's emotions and mood. This framework allows the viewer emphasise with the subject at hand from an appropriate distance. (LaCapra, 2001) (Bennett, 2005)

To better illustrate this point, it may be useful to first consider the art conventions in which both Szapocznikow and Abakanowicz were educated, and which they moved away from to pursue their more fragmented styles, which as previously indicated are both highly appropriate for exploring the subject of trauma. During the post-war period, the mandated style of works made in Poland was socialist realism (socrealism). Officially enforced by decree in 1949, socrealism in Poland was a part of the broader Stalinization efforts to strengthen Soviet influence over the country. The art movement was characterised largely by idealised scenes of life under socialism, pieces uplifting the worker, and general pro-USSR messages. Socrealism was mostly abandoned by the political thaw of 1956, which marked the end of Stalinism in Poland. (Cymer, 2019) Some artists, like Abakanowicz, were educated in socrealism only because it was required in the Fine Art Academies, worked in different styles privately and rejected socrealism immediately upon the coming of the political thaw. For many Polish artists, breaking away from socrealism was a part of a larger rejection of Stalinization efforts, and their practices formed as rebellions against socrealist expectations, "a total break with the past." (Rose, 1994, pp. 12-14) Non-conformity under Soviet control brought challenges, but was not impossible after the thaw. (Rose, 1994, pp. 15-19) While those practices can be viewed as an opposite response to socrealism, they offer only one side of the story in terms of visual evidence. That is where Szapocznikow's practice offers an exception: the artist worked in the socrealist style extensively early in her career before breaking away from it during the 1950s. Szapocznikow produced large scale socrealist works which one may contrast with her later pieces. Indeed, socrealism was not only tolerated by the artist, but for a while, viewed positively. Jakubowska cites art historian Piotr Piotrowski arguing that:

> [socrealism] offered a sense of new integration, the removal of the psychic wound, abjection, and the construction of a new subjectivity in a situation which – through pushing away painful memories – could provide a person with a sense of safety [in the face of the post-war crisis]. (Jakubowska, 2008, p. 57)

She posits that Szapocznikow's initial interest in socrealism was likely related to the hope of a renewal after the war and a desire to avoid what happened to her, though the sheer demand for socrealist works at the time was also likely a factor. (Jakubowska, 2008, pp. 56-58)

Fig 12. Alina Szapocznikow, *Monument of Polish-Soviet Friendship,* bronze, 1954

Fig 13. Alina Szapocznikow photographed during the process of making the *Monument of Polish-Soviet Friendship,* 1953.

After the democratic transition of the late 1980s and 1990s, many socrealist works were viewed negatively and torn down: such was the case with one of Szapocznikow's statues. The piece, seen in Fig. 12-13, titled *Monument of Polish-Soviet Friendship*, was originally placed inside the socrealist Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw. It certainly offered the comfort of avoidance, presenting an idealised vision of post-war relations. The whitewashing of any discussions of trauma in this period, as noted in Chapter 1, slowed the ability to process and cope with the events of the war on a national scale. It is possible that it was that inadequacy in the face of trauma that eventually motivated Szapocznikow to move away from her interest in socrealism.

The *Monument of Polish-Soviet Friendship*, often referred to only as *Friendship*, avoids the representation of abject wounds. It depicts two men standing

strong arm in arm. As established by the title, they serve as personifications of the USSR and Poland. They are posed close, gazing surely in the same direction, in order to represent alliance and unity. (Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2024) The work is very characteristic of socrealism. Both of the figures are idealised everymen, sculpted to look healthy and confident. The monument might evoke feelings of safety and trust in national strength in a viewer. That is its ultimate purpose. Like other socrealist works, *Friendship* was meant to present national strength and solidify public opinion. To this end, the monument could not engage with trauma as a subject, but rather had to deny all possible reminders of it. It was sculpted avoidance, and therefore a curious contrast to Szapocznikow's later works, which embodied pain and suffering. Essentially, *Friendship* functions as the antithesis to how one may represent trauma in art; it will be of use in noting how both Szapocznikow's later works, as well as Abakanowicz's formative denial of socrealist standards, utilise opposite techniques in order to empathically communicate trauma to a viewer.

According to author and historian Dominick LaCapra, it would likely be the soothing, uplifting imagery present in *Friendship* that prevents it from properly representing trauma. In his book, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), LaCapra argues that works which represent trauma well, ones which he refers to as engaging in empathic unsettlement, cannot be made with the goal of "[deriving] reassurance or a benefit (for example, unearned confidence about the ability of the human spirit to endure any adversity with dignity and nobility)." (LaCapra, 2001, p. 42) The experience of trauma never includes an uplifting moral, and thus representations of trauma should also avoid it. LaCapra's framework is based primarily on reckoning with the extreme ends of the spectrum historians and writers may fall into when engaging with traumatic events. On one end, one may look only at the cold facts and data in order to disengage emotionally. They will thus fully ignore the human experience integral to understanding trauma. On the other end, one may be overtly emotional to the extent of over-identifying with the victim, believing they can claim their experience and speak for them. This can also lead to the moral narrativising mentioned earlier, or a voyeuristic approach to a victim's experience. Empathic unsettlement is meant to reconcile these two extremes by having the viewer engage with portrayals of trauma with empathy, while simultaneously acknowledging that

they cannot fully grasp the victim's experience. To achieve this, a work should unsettle the viewer without trying to complete a narrative for them. It should disturb and disorient them in a way that mirrors the affective state of trauma. (LaCapra, 2001)

When looking at *Friendship* through the lens of empathic unsettlement, the avoidance of trauma becomes clearer. The unchallenging image of the strong national everyman takes a complex war aftermath and eases it into an uplifting moral. By reassuring the viewer, the work ensures they will not be unsettled into questioning their preconceived notions, nor be reminded of any traumatic affect. Comparing it to a non-socrealist work made by Szapocznikow only a year or two later, *Exhumed*, the 1955 statue seen in Fig 14., the contrast is clear. With *Exhumed*, Szapocznikow completely abandons the structures of state-sanctioned socrealism. As implied by the title, the sculpture resembles a male corpse brought out of its grave to be put on show. The figure is smaller than life size, with no arms, amputated legs and a disfigured skin cast in bronze. It seems the exact opposite image of the two men in *Friendship*: weak, thin, curled up in an almost protective position. Where the bold national personifications comforted the viewer, the disfigured figure scares them. The figure's face caves in on itself, while its surface is rough and seemingly charred. Abjectly, it seems to exist on the borderline between life and death. While the body resembles a corpse, Szapocznikow sculpts it sitting up with one leg contracting upwards, which gives it a strange contorting quality, as if the corpse has either come to life, or is being manipulated into movement by unseen hands. By resembling the abject, the piece achieves the empathic unsettlement LaCapra describes as crucial in portrayals of trauma.

Both the figure's disfigurement and its paradoxical pose may unnerve a viewer faced with the piece. Elaine Scarry wrote that one's understanding of pain is often held in the terminology of the weapon and the wound because the feeling itself is so difficult to describe. Only hearing about someone else's pain causes doubt. (Scarry, 1985, pp. 14-16) *Exhumed* utilises a similar technique to evoke a feeling of physical and mental anguish in its viewer; instead of a description of the experience, it is the immediacy of the coarse body, marked by holes and amputations, the way the figure

Fig 14. Alina Szapocznikow, *Exhumed,* bronze, 1955.

Fig 15. Alina Szapocznikow, *Exhumed,* bronze, 1955.

seems to twist in pain, that show the viewer the physical effects of anguish and cause an immediate empathic discomfort in them. The physical qualities of the object help to dispel the doubt one has when hearing about another's pain. Engaging with *Exhumed* causes the viewer to react in the exact way LaCapra outlines in his definition of empathic unsettlement. The viewer, noting their own discomfort, may understand that what they are viewing is a true experience separate for them and not made for their enjoyment. Their own experience of empathic feeling may allow them to better grasp the unspeakableness inherent to pain. Doubt is eliminated through the experience objectified in the piece; the unspeakable is made physical, and through disturbance, allows for empathy to occur.

Relating back to the context of socrealism, one may note that uncertainty and questioning seem to be core aspects of communicating trauma through art. Whereas *Friendship* follows socrealist form with a very telling title, *Exhumed* is more ambiguous. This is likely because trauma itself is so based in sensory and emotional experience, actively disabling the parts of the brain through which one may synthesise cause and effect or a linear narrative. Therefore art portraying trauma may likely be conceptual, abstracted, or at the very least, ambiguous. One may note that this also relates back to the idea of intentional obfuscation discussed in Chapter 2, through which an artist may use the process of making to explore personal experience, while obfuscating the details in the finished work. One could question whether this concealment interferes with the ability of a viewer to earnestly relate to what they are presented with. To explore that question, it would be valuable to look at Jill Bennett's writings on trauma and art. The core of Bennett's book on the subject, *Empathic Vision* (2005), builds on frameworks such as LaCapra's empathic unsettlement and theories of trauma by psychiatrists such as Bessel van der Kolk, to discuss the ways in which trauma may be communicated in art. Bennett argues that trauma is best communicated through affect, an emotional state, and not narrative, citing the structure of trauma akin to the one discussed here. Art can create an embodied encounter through which the viewer can experience a recreation of the sensory and emotional nature of trauma; concealing or obfuscating exact facts and reason may indeed more accurately convey trauma to a viewer, leaving them with the same confusion and bodily sensations that characterise it. (Bennett, 2005)

Additionally, Bennett argues that this focus on affective experience does not diminish critical engagement. She writes that it is the initial emotional response that proves to be the catalyst for later critical inquiry; the lack of a set narrative combined with a strong emotional impact forces the viewer to interpret and ponder the meaning of the work. Bennett argues that because of this, art is "not driven by or enslaved by any particular understanding; it is always productive of ideas." (Bennett, 2005, p. 8) Therefore, the focus on emotions and sensory experience does not necessarily prohibit a more factual or testimonial understanding. Rather, the use of affect stimulates the viewer to think critically about what they have been presented with because of the initial strong emotional reaction they experience.

In discussions of *Exhumed, s*ome have posited that the piece is referencing the murder and later rehabilitation of Laszlo Rajk, and is thus commenting on the victims of Stalinism, while others considered the work to be a wider testament to the experience of war victims, including Szapocznikow herself. (Jakubowska, 2008, pp. 99-100) Jakubowska argues that this plethora of interpretations results from the ambiguity of the piece, which, again, relates to the artist concealing a certain degree of individual experience within a more collective viewpoint. (Jakubowska, 2008, p. 98) Linking Jakubowska's analysis with Bennett's framework, one may see how the non-narrative, fragmented nature of trauma lends itself both to the previously discussed privacy for the artist, as well as the stimulation of discussion in the viewer. Whereas works such as *Friendship* dictate what the viewer is meant to take from them, *Exhumed* focuses on trauma as an affective, indescribable experience which refuses explanations and narrative closure, and thus provokes a need in the viewer to further investigate its subject. In this way, the unspeakableness of trauma actually strengthens communication. By externalising an individual's experience of trauma into a non-narrative, abstracted object, the viewer connects with the piece on an emotional level, which causes them to understand trauma better in a general context, as well as pursue a broader inquiry into the sociopolitical issues involved. By abstracting the personal into an affective encounter, a piece may inspire more critical discussions that can contribute to collective forms of recognition and betterment.

Magdalena Abakanowicz's 1976-1980 *Backs* also proves to be a valuable example of an artwork that serves as an affective encounter. Where the socrealist standard expects an everyman to appear as an inspiration to its viewer and a reassurance of national strength, Abakanowicz's work instead uses duplications of the anonymous everyman in a crowd to create an affective encounter. Similarly to *Katarsis* and *Crowds*, *Backs* includes a selection of 80 hollow figures made out of fabric and resin. Again, the bodies appear headless, with their fronts carved out, and only a clearly sculpted back remaining. The strength of *Backs* as a denial of Abakanowicz's initial socrealist education lies in its weakness and vulnerability. The figures are huddled together in a scared, defensive position. Not one stands out as a bravely narrativised hero amongst them; while each figure is unique, they are all collectively posed in the same manner, seemingly all sharing an experience of fear and pain. Abakanowicz chooses to communicate their affective state through their backs, taut spines, and roughed up skin. Van der Kolk writes about the common link between trauma and chronic muscle tension, which often presents as pain in the back

Fig 16. Magdalena Abakanowicz, *Backs*, fabric and resin, 1976-1980

and spine. (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 265) Through presenting the body as a site of injury and pain, using the commonly understood tensed back to represent stress and fear, Abakanowicz brings a sensory experience to the forefront of the piece, allowing the viewer to easily relate to the presented bodies. The use of fabric further pushes

the immediacy of the flesh. As Scarry writes in *The Body in Pain* (1985), made objects can easily be seen as a projection of the human body. She lists as an example a bandage being placed over an open wound, and immediately becoming a substitute for the missing skin. (Scarry, 1985, p. 281) Thus, Abakanowicz using the wrinkled, dirtied fabric reminiscent of a bandage over an open wound achieves two goals: it immediately calls to mind the idea of a wound and pain, and it becomes a projection of skin, covering what is not there. This further amplifies the unsettlement of the viewer by playing into an abject form: a skin that is also not a skin, a wound, a dirtied bandage.

The intentional object of the figures' emotional state, which could be unknowable to the viewer, is not shown. The viewer is left only with the unsettlement of the tension of their bodies, a physical manifestation of an affective state that may be easily understood and related to. At the same time, Abakanowicz's use of duplication strikes at another element of LaCapra's framework of empathic unsettlement: the divide between the viewer and the victim. By composing *Backs* as a crowd of repeated figures sharing a collective experience, differentiated only by the details of their flesh, Abakanowicz separates the viewer from them. Entering the room housing the piece, the viewer immediately senses a divide between themselves and the sculpted bodies. They all huddle in fear, facing the same direction; they share physical characteristics, and present similar symptoms of an affective state. Though the viewer can relate to the tension shown in their poses, they remain distinctly separate, standing amongst the duplicated crowd. They might even consider themselves as the object of their fear, or complicit in their suffering. This encapsulates LaCapra's idea of empathic unsettlement: though the viewer may relate to the presented experience, they are also shown the separation between them and the trauma, ensuring they do not over-identify with the victim to the point of claiming their experience.

The use of visual art to communicate trauma becomes particularly effective when it engages with the affect of trauma and not a strict biographical retelling. Through the use of affective encounters and empathic unsettlement outlined by Bennet and LaCapra respectively, artists can use the immediacy of the medium to

mirror the experience of trauma for a viewer. Reflecting both physical injury and emotional state, a work may allow a viewer to experience a fraction of the disorienting nature of trauma. While the cold facts of a traumatic experience may frighten a viewer, it is the portrayal of trauma as an affective experience that can achieve understanding and implore them to engage further with the subject. By creating an immediate encounter, an artist can communicate the experience of trauma through a form that does not necessitate flattening it into a false, uplifting narrative. Instead, they may allow the paradoxical, fragmented structures of trauma to dictate medium, and thus allow for clearer communication between themselves and the viewer.

Conclusion

The examined works by Abakanowicz and Szapocznikow show a clear reflection of the experience of trauma. Fragmented, injured, and paradoxical, they are the images of what this thesis set out to examine: how visual art may be used as a successful tool for processing and communicating the trauma of war. By avoiding the verbal, ordered structures that necessitate the difficult translation of trauma's jumbled form, visual art allows artists to externalise their inner experience in the same manner as it appears in their bodies. The structure of trauma, as explored in Chapter 1, makes healing challenging. As stated by van der Kolk, trauma operates in a different way than all other forms of memory. It is destructive, unstructured, a frightening chaos of sensory and emotional flashes. (van der Kolk, 2014) Like the pain described by Scarry, trauma's immediacy makes it incomprehensible. The way it differs from other intentional states makes it hard to describe to others. There is little to compare it to. (Scarry, 1985) It can be abject, disturbing, and cause those who witness it to want to reject it, as it threatens to disturb the order of their lives. (Kristeva, 1980) Yet facing trauma and working through it is necessary for one to live a fulfilling life. That is why finding coping tools that can accurately represent trauma is so crucial to healing. Visual art, which also exists within the emotional, sensory and spatial areas of the brain, is one of these important tools.

An artist can use visual art to process their own trauma. Through externalising their internal experience, they may face and understand it more easily. As seen in Chapter 2, both artists used their practices to engage with trauma. Abakanowicz's fragmented figurative sculptures encompass a multitude of meaning at once, mirroring the paradoxical nature of trauma. They allow the jumble of trauma to be synthesised into a physical form without ordering its chaotic form. Meanwhile, Szapocznikow's process of making *Souvenir I* (1971) shows how the process of art making may allow for vulnerable admissions to eventually be obfuscated from the final piece, allowing for privacy. It also proves how the non-linear composition of visual art can portray a similar emotional experience to traumatic memory.

Visual art can also help communicate a nearly inexpressible trauma to others, as was shown in Chapter 3. Through the use of empathic unsettlement, which allows

for the viewer to relate to an experience without claiming it (LaCapra, 2001), and affective encounters, which sacrifice narrative in order to focus on an emotional reaction (Bennett, 2005) the parts of trauma that are incredibly difficult to put into words may instead be recreated as a physical work that viewers can engage with. The ability of works such as Szapocznikow's *Exhumed* (1955) and Abakanowicz's *Backs* (1976-1980) to disturb viewers and make them understand how trauma feels on a pre-verbal level were contrasted in this chapter with Szapocznikow's socrealist standard *Friendship* (1954). This further shows that visual art as a medium is not the only prerequisite to communicating trauma. The artist must use the medium to reflect the affective, fragmented experience of trauma by allowing the viewer to feel disturbed, and denying them an easy narrative in the same way those experiencing trauma are denied it by their own bodies.

Comparing the practices of Abakanowicz and Szapocznikow reveals shared elements which allow trauma to be accurately portrayed, processed and communicated through visual art. The use of the body as a site of trauma, fragmentation and duplication, abject contrasts, paradoxical meanings and a lack of a neatly structured narrative are all tools used by both artists to externalise trauma into an artwork. The key element that allows for visual art to be an effective method for engaging with trauma is that it does not try to fight against the way trauma is structured. Instead, it mirrors it with a medium that shares the same traits. It gives form to what cannot be said without demanding it to be falsely translated.

Examining visual art as a tool for coping with trauma offers an alternative avenue for those dealing with traumatic memory. Like Abakanowicz said of creating *Katarsis* (1985), seeing one's inner experience externalised in an artwork may give them the sense of happiness and unity (Rose, 1994, p. 101) that trauma often denies. Likewise, it allows for a relatively new understanding of trauma to be communicated to an audience not through statistics or psychological terminology, but rather through an underlying, pre-verbal affect. Works like these may ease the discussion of trauma, offering benefits to not only those who have experienced it, but to the wider systems around them, which must achieve an understanding of trauma to facilitate the healing of their own parts. While this thesis explored the subject in the narrow context of two Polish sculptural artists who survived WW2, the discussion could and should

continue in regards to others' experience. The world has not allowed war to be discussed as an element of the past. As it has for centuries, war continues to impact people across the globe. The way artists from different backgrounds and contexts utilise visual art to process and communicate their experience of war and other trauma would be a good future direction for this research to take.

There is no one experience of trauma, and no one tool that heals it, yet the ability to imagine and create has proved invaluable in dealing with what may otherwise seem unchangeable. To heal, one must be able to imagine a different way of being. Ultimately, visual art proves itself to be a valuable tool where words fail. In the aftermath of WW2, the art practices of Abakanowicz and Szapocznikow show that even bereft of a contemporary understanding of trauma and resources, one can find methods of healing. Through giving form to trauma via the medium of visual art, through allowing it to encompass each paradox and disturbing sensation that challenges their mind and body, one can process what seems incomprehensible and communicate what seems inexpressible.

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