

Artistic contribution

The rematerialisation of trauma:
a dialogue on love

The rematerialisation of trauma: a dialogue on love

By Peter Brandt & Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld

Prologue

Katrine

Dear Peter,

I am grateful for our friendship and to have you as a colleague.

This presentation was originally created for the conference *Fast Forward: Women in European Art 1970 - present*,¹ where I “smuggled” you in.²

In our case “smuggling” was an attempt to unsettle the category “women artists” and to ask what constitutes feminist art practices today.

Peter

The title is two-fold:

The rematerialisation of trauma: a dialogue on love

“Rematerialisation of Trauma” was a title we came up with for a collective show that hasn’t been realised yet but must be.

Katrine

A dialogue on love is inspired by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s book of the same title, which is a transcription of her seances with her therapist after having been diagnosed with terminal breast cancer (Sedgwick, 1999).

Sedgwick’s work has been foundational to my own practice and research into how to create reparative critical practices in response to different broken situations. Your work has been foundational to thinking with how the reparative practitioner gathers the fragments they are left with into new assemblages.

Following both the recurrence of rather traumatic events in our lives:

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- 1) This presentation was originally created for the conference *Fast Forward: Women in European Art 1970 - present*, organised by Kerry Greaves 2021. We are grateful to Greaves for the opportunity to develop this piece. To access the video documentation of the performative presentation: <https://vimeo.com/user49012411>
 - 2) We borrow the term smuggling from Irit Rogoff: “The term ‘smuggling’ here extends far beyond a series of adventurous gambits. It reflects the search for practice that goes beyond conjunctives such as those that bring together ‘art *and* politics or ‘theory *and* practice’ or ‘analysis *and* action’” (Rogoff, 2006).

you have been subjected to death threats and insults by your neighbour since 2020, and a near-death violent attack in Rome 2002.



Still from video, Anonymous Artists, 2020.

Peter

You are being subjected to a media blitz, White³ rage, hate and threats on social media and stalking after you decided to take the responsibility for the artistic happening carried out by Anonymous Artists, in 2020 (Buckley, 2021). In the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests globally, where monuments to colonists were being toppled worldwide, at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, a plaster cast copy of a bust of Frederik V was removed from its pedestal in the assembly hall of the art academy and submerged in Copenhagen harbour. Frederik V bought the West Indian Guinean Company – the trading company that was managing the Danish trade of enslaved Africans from the Gold Coast (today Ghana) and the Danish West Indian Islands (today United States Virgin Islands) as well as the plantation complex – the same year he founded the art academy, directly tying the birth of the modern art institution in Denmark with the enslavement of people and extraction of resources in the colonies.

3) We capitalise “W” in “White” throughout the text when it refers to racial identity following Nell Irvin Painter’s important opinion “Why ‘White’ Should be Capitalized, too” (Painter, 2020). We want to thank La Vaughn Belle for alerting us to this.

Act I: Rematerialisation

Katrine

You have been a great support and friend, and our conversations on art and life have been healing to me. So, I hope that we can engage in a dialogue on love to further advance the notion of the *rematerialisation of trauma* through the prism of our different artistic practices.



Looking for Pasolini (searching for Ana Mendieta), Peter Brandt, 2020-21
1 inkjet print 27x28 cm. 2 Ink Jet prints 29x43,50 cm. 1 object papier
mâché/pastel/fabric from the jacket PB had on when he got assaulted in
Rome in 2002. 18x18x60 cm. 1 Inkjet print/archive material from the Carl
Andre court case 1988, 32x29 cm. 2020-21. Photo: Mikkel Kaldal

When I visited your exhibition *History of Violence* at Gallery Image in Århus, Denmark, September 2021⁴ – in which you explore the relations between violence, trauma and gender by tracing the violent deaths of the Italian film director, author and intellectual Pier Paolo Pasolini and Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta, intertwined with your own experiences of violence – I couldn't help being haunted by one question:

4) For more information about Peter Brandt's exhibition *History of Violence*, please visit <https://www.galleriimage.dk/index.php/dk/2021/1344-history-of-violence>



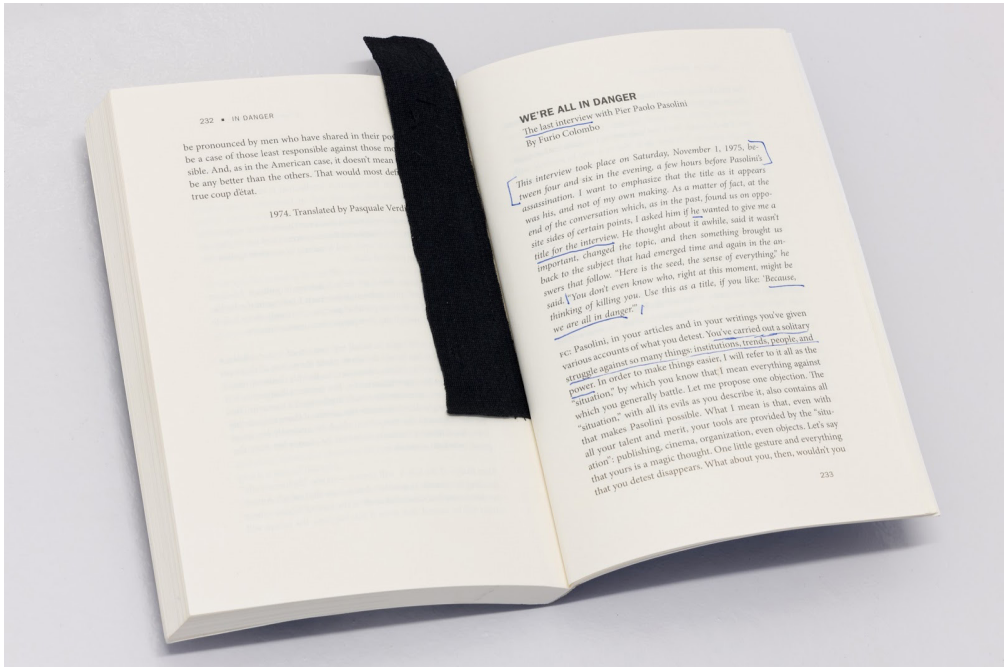
Wit(h)nessesing, Peter Brandt, 2020-21 (detail).
Material from 1 VHS tape of Pier Paolo Pasolini's film *Salò, or The 120 Days of Sodom*,
1975, adhesive tape, 218x126 cm. 2020-21. Photo: Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld

What does it mean to be touched by *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* today?

Literally, to walk through the de-spoiled magnetic tapes of the film *Salò* by Pasolini, which he made shortly before he was brutally murdered. The film was made as a portrait of the fascist Republic of Salò (1943-45) with its extreme violence. Exploring themes of political corruption, authoritarianism, morality, capitalism, totalitarianism, sexuality and fascism, the film also becomes a violent film to experience in itself.

What does it mean to let the magnetic tape touch our skin?

What does it mean to counter the fascisms, "the situation" as PPP described it, today, 46 years after that very same "situation" killed Pasolini?



Because we are all in danger (detail), Peter Brandt, 2020-21.
2 Ink Jet prints 29x43,50 cm. Book: *In Danger: A Pasolini Anthology*, edited,
with an introduction by Jack Hirschman, published by City Lights Books,
2010. Ink annotations and bookmark made of fabric from the jacket PB had
on while he was assaulted in Rome, in 2002. Photo: Mikkel Kaldal

If I am trying to go back in memory,
to think of how we came up with the title,
it was in relation to how you, after all these years after the attack in Rome —
were being attacked again: being threatened by your neighbour —
and I was being threatened by Facebook trolls, right-wingers...
Like having a bruise,
that never really vanishes,
and each week the bully, the fascist, the cardinal's assistants, the bureaucrats, the journalists, the
Facebook trolls, the Zoom bombers come back to hit you in the same place.
Just as a reminder that the bruise is still there,
it exists,
and it is real.

I think of this each time I see your piece *The Order of EMPATHY*



The Order of EMPATHY (detail), Peter Brandt, 2016-17.
Silk, cotton pads, safety pins, stone from the crime scene, azorbé wood,
210x130x4 cm. 25x19x11 cm. Photo: Salim Santa Lucia

Peter

One aspect of the reparative critical practice, in your reworking of Sedgwick's term, is that it enters into a process of *rematerialisation* with the objects it engages with (Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2016). When you introduced the notion of *rematerialisation*, following the artistic happening, you were subjected to bullying by the media in Denmark. But if we are to do justice to the notion of rematerialisation, how can we conceive of the rematerialisation of trauma?

It was another filmmaker Harun Farocki that first attracted you to the notion of *rematerialisation* – Farocki notes that the process of digitisation, as well as new image technologies, are not a withdrawal from matter, but that the image enters into a process of rematerialisation (Farocki, 2010).

Katrine

Walking through the de-spooled, magnetic tapes of *Salò* as I enter your exhibition *History of Violence*, I am touched by the violent history, which the film itself can be seen as a “material wit(h)ness”⁵ to the fascist history that it documents, the film's violence in itself, as well as the brutal murder of PPP. The magnetic tape-curtain sets off a movie camera inside of me that translates the

5) We draw on Susan Schuppli's important concept of “material witness” but use it slightly differently by adding an “h”. See explanation further in the text.

scraps of information that I am presented with in the exhibition – documents, fragments of fabric from the jacket that almost killed you, newspaper articles, police reports etc. – into new montages.

I burrow backwards and forwards in my own discarded memory, stitching the bits and pieces into a whole. The result is an incongruent image – part pixel, part film, part video, part sound, part Pater (I wrote as a glitch instead of Peter), part Pasolini, part Mendieta.

In that montage our lives and our trauma are no longer singular and individualised but become plural and form new queer collectivities of artists, of friendships and encounters across time and geographies.

According to Sedgwick and Renu Bora there is no material that is void of texture, they differentiate between texture and texxture with two xx's (Sedgwick, 2003, pp. 14–15). In a simplified manner “texxture” with two xx's enfolds the very history of its making in the texture itself, while “textures” with only one x hide their own history in their polished surface, rendering their properties and histories invisible to their beholders.

Act II: Trauma



A Violent Life, Peter Brandt, 2020-21.

2 police documents (death threats against PB 17/4, 2020), pencil 30x20 cm, quote by Cathy Caruth, 1 silk/acrylic painting 37x32 cm, 1 Ink jet print 27x28 cm (some of the text is from the novel *History of Violence* by Édouard Louis, 2016, translated by Lorin Stein, published by Penguin Books UK, 2018). Photo: Mikkel Kaldal

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Peter

Cathy Caruth:

“The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them. Or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess (and thus which possesses them)”. (Caruth, 1996)

Katrine

Reworking Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s notion of “reparative critical practices” and following Lauren Berlant’s important book *Cruel Optimism* (2011), I have been interested in exploring how to move away from the discourse of trauma, towards a discourse of affect.

According to Berlant, trauma is no longer the exception to “an ordinary life that was supposed just to keep going on” – but rather in our neoliberalist, White, heteronormative society has become a “crisis ordinariness” (Berlant, 2011, p. 10). Maybe similar to what Pasolini in his book *In Danger*, on display in your exhibition, was referring to as “the situation” (Pasolini, 2010). Trauma no longer becomes a state of exception but the situation which we are all in, like “the weather” (Sedgwick & Goldberg, 2012; Sharpe, 2016), upheld by the institutions we move around in: the milieu, the nation-states, the continuum of wars, pollution, social, economic, racial, gendered and sexual violence, inequality and other forms of oppression.

In response to this situation, Berlant proposes the concept of cruel optimism “as a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently. Even if it involves attachments that are cruel” (Berlant, 2011).

Similarly, in your work, there is a cruel optimism at play that finds sustenance to make life bearable through an attachment to objects, and subjects, despite some of those objects being cruel. And an attachment to fragments from a culture, whose desire has been not to sustain you:

A fragment from a police report,

Peter

Your indictment from the police,

Katrine

A fragment from a jacket, that almost got you killed,

A sculpture by Carl Andre,

The sculpture of Andre dematerialises the entire museum: Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, in Rome – and the exhibition *Io dico Io – I say I* on female Italian artists of different generations.⁶

Peter

Like the museum, Louisiana dematerialises the conference *Fast Forward: Women in European Art 1970 – present*.

Katrine

But your work rematerialises the cruel objects you engage with, through cutting them up, burning them and stitching them together into new montages. Drawing out sustenance from fragments, which enables them to reconfigure and create new fabulations.

The rematerialisation of trauma, in your work, is not the memory lost – the data loss – but rather becomes an abundance of data, material and what we might term: “Material wit(h)ness”.

ACT III: Material wit(h)ness

In your exhibition the jacket and the document become such “material wit(h)nesses” that, in reference to Susan Schuppli’s important work on “material witness”, both bear testimony to the event, but also a device through which to approach and understand the event (Schuppli, 2016). But your aim is not forensics, or finding the truth, but rather becomes what you – following Bracha Ettinger – call “wit(h)nessing” (Ettinger, 2008).

Ettinger writes that each one of us is already in a relationship before any assumption of an independent subjectivity. But in your montages the document, the fragment, as well as we the audiences are invited into what we might call “material wit(h)nessing” or being with the fragments that we are presented with in a *more-than-visual sensing* and mattering.

Through this process of rematerialisation this intersubjective empathy creates a possibility of rearticulation in which the hegemonic forces of that very regulatory law “that governs who counts as a subject, and which lives are worth protecting, in society” are called into question (Butler, 1993, p. 2).

6) For more information about the exhibition please visit:
<https://lagallerianazionale.com/mostra/io-dico-io-i-say-i>

CUT: *Hacking the White patriarchal form*⁷



Plaster cast copy of the bust of Frederik V on the harbour of Copenhagen, Anonymous Artists, 2020.

Peter

Going back to the artistic happening that took place at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, the aim was to raise discussion about how the art academy was founded on colonial violence and how structural and institutional racism and discrimination is still operating today inside and outside of the art academy and the art institutions in Denmark.

By giving the plaster cast copy of the bust of Frederik V back to the water, the Copenhagen harbour that formed the centre of the colonial trade, the copy of the bust in its White patriarchal form is called into question: *who counts as a subject and who is perceived as rational, free, equal and an authority in society?*

Out of that transformation or rematerialisation in the water the concave form to the White patriarchal form appears. A form that has striking similarities to Ana Mendieta's *Untitled: Silueta Series* (1973-80)

7) This title is inspired by Denise Ferreira Da Silva (Ferreira da Silva, 2018)



School of Re-membering, 2021. Student-led initiative producing souvenir plaster busts of the rematerialised plaster cast copy of the bust after its transformation in the water. Photo: Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld

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To give it back to the elements: earth, water, ice, fire...

The woman, the queer, the Indigenous, the Black, the migrant, the refugee, the other – the condemned of colonial modernity.

Peter

The artist,

Katrine

the poet,

Peter

who hack the White patriarchal form,

Katrine

Power,

Peter

oppressive power structures and Taboos,

Katrine

also fears,

Peter

or lives in an incessant fear of getting killed,

Katrine

or hurt...

Peter

Who counts as a subject?

Who counts as an artist?

Katrine

Who is left to drown at the bottom of the sea?

Peter

What is dredged up to be restored,

Katrine

- or cast anew?



Rematerialisations #2. Peter Brandt & Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld in collaboration with Firat Jacob Tas & Samar Kanafani. Destiny's Oslo, 2022.

Two-sided banners with the inscription: *Who counts as a subject?*

Who is left to drown at the bottom of the sea?

What is dredged up to be restored or cast anew? Wool, velvet.

Photo: Tor S. Ulstein

Peter Brandt (b. 1966) is a visual artist based in Copenhagen and **Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld** (b. 1981), PhD, is a visual artist, independent researcher and educator. Their artistic work centres around queer-feminist practices working with histories of violence, trauma and affect. Together they have created the performative conversation *The Re-materialisation of Trauma: A Dialogue on Love* (Louisiana, 2021) and the textile artwork *Rematerialisations #2*, (Destiny's Oslo, 2022).

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Debilitation of artists in the 1930s and today

An afterword to Peter Brandt and Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld's performance "The rematerialisation of trauma: a dialogue on love".

By Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt

What were the frames of producing and living as a critical artist in 1930s Germany and in our historical present in Denmark? With the reparative dialogue of Peter Brandt and Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld, the vulnerability of artists' rights and lives in Denmark becomes a diachronous matter: artist Brandt relates artistically to Pier Paolo Pasolini's and Ana Mendieta's violent deaths in 1975 and 1985 respectively at a moment of his life, where death threats seem to haunt him. Dirckinck-Holmfeld is expelled from her position as head of the Department for Art, Writing and Research and postdoctoral researcher at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts after she decided to take the responsibility for an artistic happening by Anonymous Artists, that pointed to the continuation of coloniality in Denmark. With this afterword, I wish to emphasise the continuation of – on a structural level – deprivation of rights and debilitation of life, and – on the personal level – the experience of vulnerability, pressure, and harassment of artistic positions dissonant to the consensus and norms of the nation-state.

After Adolf Hitler's taking over the parliament in 1933, exhibitions were closed, employees at museums were fired for their selection of controversial artworks, professors at art academies were dismissed, the Bauhaus school was shut down, and – as is well known – about 17,000 artworks were seized as *entartete Kunst*. During the Second World War, artists and critics of National Socialism, Jews, communists, and homosexuals, were executed in the concentration camps.

According to Hannah Arendt, the deprivation of rights is a fundamental element in the rise of National Socialism in the 1930s and, later, a foundational premise for the Holocaust. We can historicise a connection, according to Arendt, from colonialism to National Socialism and a reoccurring strategy: first comes rightlessness in relation to civil rights, then the deprivation of the very right to live (Arendt, 1951; Traverso, 2017). It is in line with this historiography of the deprivation of rights and lives that I understand the pressure under which critical artists, who challenge colonial amnesia or stir aesthetic norms, operate today facing the reality of harassment, police reports and death threats. A stressful chain of disturbances that follow each other from the questioning of, and threat against, artistic freedom over the deprivation of the right to work as an artist to the debilitation of production and artists' lives as such.

When Peter Brandt and Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld performed their reparative dialogue in the fall of 2021 about their respective experiences of death threats and harassment as artists in Denmark, they held each other's gazes and shared their memories as a testimony of a historical present, where racism, misogyny, colonial amnesia, and anti-gender sentiments have found new conditions of growth in online fora as well as in the public discourse. It became clear, with their different, yet

hand-in-hand statements, that despite long achieved women's rights, anti-discrimination laws, and an increased public awareness of structural harassment on the basis of gender, sexuality, racialisation, and colonial relations, artists' lives are still vulnerable, and actual utterances of criticality are still less protected than the concept of freedom of expression and the obligation to protect national property.

In her book *The right to Maim* (2017), queer feminist theorist Jasbir Puar writes about the strategy of debilitation in political conflict. In her case, about the contemporary racial violence of the US police and the harmful, settler-protecting presence of Israeli soldiers in Gaza. While some – with a scent of Hannah Arendt's analysis of duty over ethics in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. - are claiming to 'do their job', others are stressed, weakened, made less capable of working and living by exactly this continuation of people dutifully 'doing their job'. Thinking about how in 2020 the Council of the Academy (*Akademiraadet*) announced that they would report the group of Anonymous Artists to the police for theft of and vandalism of the collection managed by the council,⁸ instead of protecting artistic freedom – as artists, colleagues and exactly managers of art – the Council of the Academy were 'doing their job'; and hereby making several artists less capable of working and producing art in our times. Doing one's job is always a matter of interpretation of what and who should be protected, in this case it became artworks over artists, a dead artist (and his nameless collaborators making the original cast in the 18th century, and the people reproducing the plaster cast copy in the 1950s) over a group of young artists in our historical present, tradition over contemporary expression, conservation over decolonising practice. Artists working with a critique of heteronormativity, coloniality and racism, as is the case with Brandt and Dirckinck-Holmfeld, are allegedly met with aesthetic judgements building on concern for the importance of artworks, but actually they are managed with biopolitical power to decide which lives (and afterlives) are worth protecting and which are not.

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8) The happening had already been reported to the police by the politicians Morten Messerschmidt from Danish People's Party and Nikolaj Bøgh from the Conservatives. Eventually, the Council of the Academy decided not to report the happening to the police.

