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Approaching trauma: South African painting through Kant, Greenberg and Lacan

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Image on Cover: Walter Oltmann, 1997. *Basket II* (Detail). Graphite on paper, 80 x 80cm. Courtesy of Warren Siebrits

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Date: 21/07/2016

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to consider a concept of trauma which may offer support for the contemporary interest in and practice of painting. Jacques Lacan's (1959-1960) structural and abstract articulations of trauma as *das Ding* is the central framework for the trajectory and form of the research and writing in this thesis. Lacan's seminar on *das Ding* develops the notion that philosophical and social functions of art are aimed at structuring the traumatic and tragic sphere of experience. *Das Ding* is a hypothetical construct that resonates with Kant's epistemological, moral and aesthetic philosophy. Primarily, I see the historical framework of *das Ding* as foregrounding a certain 'ethics' in my approach to painting and its interpretation. Kant's own emphasis on the communicability art may offer is key to this thesis. His focus is not on interpretation as an act eliciting direct meaning from representations in art, but frames the potential for humane interaction: for how a consideration of the perception of beauty and the form of the cognitions that arise in private and public spheres may lay the groundwork for thinking about communicability in general. Through the lens of *das Ding*, I suggest that an emphasis on aspects of nonobjective, non-communicable elements of making and experiencing painting is a viable way of contemplating both its pleasures and, often, its more painful effects. I contend that the displacement of meaning enabled by conceptualising the structural implications of trauma, in theory and in the practice of painting, may sustain a quiet yet significant social position in the wider sphere of intellectual activity and pursuits.

Chapter Summaries

Introduction 1.1 – 1.3

This section offers a review of the theoretical motivations for the thesis, while introducing the core themes and terms which have driven my research and writing practice. A number of references to mainstream ideas on trauma theory and art practice initiate my perspective on the role painting may have in displacing the relationship between trauma and art: a central aim of the thesis. Further, I locate the post-structural forms of art criticism and theoretical context from which my research emerges, and offer a basic overview of the relationship between Kant's critical position on reason and aesthetic judgment, and Lacan's concept of *das Ding*. Addressing the philosophical exigencies of *das Ding*, trauma theory and painting in combinatory and associative ways, the three sections are also aimed at establishing the form which I feel writing about painting necessarily produces: that is, to avoid reaching decisive conclusions in favour of encircling these subjects in an open question of painting's distance and proximity to signification. Nevertheless, it is hoped the reader gains some insight into the complex yet earnest difficulty I have had in formulating an intellectual approach which wants to both understand and destabilise what painting practice and its reception might be, while setting the stage for the philosophical and psychoanalytic expression of painting-as-theory.

Part Two 2.1 – 2.5: The Non-Objective Formation of *das Ding* in Painting

Part Two of the thesis considers painting in terms of aspects of Kant's philosophy which emphasise the mind-dependence of representation and that I outline in terms of the 'nonobjective'. While Kant's categorical deductions to the a priori functions of intuition, the imagination and the understanding may be viewed as quite a rigid transcendental framework, Lacan's indication of the formal relationship between transcendental judgment and an artistic anamorphosis opens the inquiry to the consideration of darker forces of desire, and trauma. However, as the section progresses I explore how Kant's own philosophy of aesthetic judgement attempts to ameliorate the severity of categorical a priori representations as an autonomous condition of subjective cognition, and instead allows for strands of connection with world and other which might be based in mutual and collective appreciation. Significantly, it is in this humanitarian vein that some art enacts the death-like and traumatic qualities proposed in Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of painting and philosophy: an aspect which I relate to Lacan's notion of art's conceptual proximity and distance to *das Ding*. Art can bring the question of death into being because it is constructed, as a modern episteme, in reference to a shared propensity for traumatic experience. I then extend the Lacanian program of death and the aesthetic to a specific articulation of Clement Greenberg's discourse on modernism. I attempt to account for how his writing on modernist painting demonstrates a nonobjective abridgement from things in themselves, thus giving rise to the potential of aesthetic judgment to provoke a perspective on the psychic distance to *das Ding* – the obverse of this distance, a proximity, being trauma and death. I see the ethical aspects of this relationship being elaborated in some postmodern theory on art, and exemplify this by way of an analysis of the contemporary painting of Mary Wafer. Wafer translates symbolic values of reason and objectivity into painterly forms that exacerbate the nonobjective qualities of psychical experience, thus relaying in indirect ways the problem of trauma and current issues of post-apartheid conflict. Trauma, formally conceptualised in reference to death (death in modernist painting, the death of things inscribed by language), seems to point to the question of translation

and transformation in the current moment. My emphasis on the metaphorical value of objectifying a distance from the psychic Real of *das Ding* thus retains the modernist signifying qualities of the nonobjective drives which come, aesthetically, to make an object of distance itself.

Part Three 3.1 – 3.4: Siopis versus the Law

Part Three involves thinking through the distance between the real and the psychic Real through the articulations of materiality in Penny Siopis's painting. Themes of trauma and violence in Siopis's multimedia practices are worked in conceptual and formal ways that are connected and consistent. I see my discussion of key works in her paintings, videos and installations as constituting a philosophical consideration of this subjectivity as a painting practice. This practice registers a rupture between the aesthetic idealism of modernist painting and a real object or video document. I construe Siopis's repeated allusions to female sex organs as symbolic of that conflict, raising the question of distance and proximity to the Real of *das Ding* as *Nebenmensch* or maternal Other. Her work seems to embody much of Deleuze's (2002: 20) evocation of painting as flesh-like and 'meaty' or folded into monadic physical states of being. But there is a way in which the materiality of her pieces seems to mock or subvert the idea of libidinal materiality as manifestly feminine. It is for this reason that my argument diverts from the more strictly feminist interpretation of Siopis's work. Rather, I conceptualise the imaginative properties of her work as a formal condition of jouissance. Through the notion of jouissance, Lacan construes material, embodied contact as prone to violence. At the point at which we find an over-identification in libidinal ecstasy, we also locate the core of an 'unfathomable aggressivity' that threatens the self as well as the social body (SVII: 186). These confusions are thus emblematic of intersubjective relations. Identifications are imaginary and can never be completely fulfilled, but this condition also constructs the physiognomy of *das Ding*. In Siopis's work, the condition emerges as the effects of a singular and blunt gesture arrested in materiality, which yet amplifies certain symbolic and allegorical meanings. I construe these conditions in and for contemporary painting: its position and/or lack of position in the public sphere constituting the ambiguity and 'shame' of painting as a source of interaction.

Conclusion: 'A Testament as well as a Theatre'

This final chapter reviews the motivations of this thesis, and considers the potential value the work may hold for future use, both by myself and other scholars. I see this thesis as a document for 'use' in that it can be seen to formulate a structure. Built through a selection of key texts in philosophy and painting, it is less a source of information than it reiterates and develops a certain schema through which information can be analysed. I elaborate on the modernist 'grid' painting, here as a theoretical schema bisected by tenets of academic 'Testament' and writing on painting as 'Theatre' (Deleuze 1994: 5). I deploy Deleuze's definition of philosophical 'repetition' between these activities as something which may account for the role of *das Ding* in the process of writing and constructing this thesis: as both a repetition of key philosophical and theoretical terms, and an exploration of their potentially new associations with painting. Further, I consider how the relation between trauma and pleasure as it is developed in this thesis may support writing on the subject of painting. Within these fields of concept and affect, I offer some final comments on painting's possible contribution towards thinking the conditions of communicability in wider spheres of engagement.

List of Abbreviations

CoR	Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787 [2013])
CoP	Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788 [2013])
CoJ	Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (1790 [2013])
SVII	Lacan, Seminar VII: *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1986[1992])
SXI	Lacan, Seminar XI: *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1973 [1981])

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Appear neither naked nor clothed,
neither sitting nor standing,
neither laughing nor weeping.

Hillel (30 BCE- 10 CE: Tosefta Ber. II)