

Introduction to Cunningham Dax Collection &
Jewish Holocaust Centre Partnership in Trauma Art

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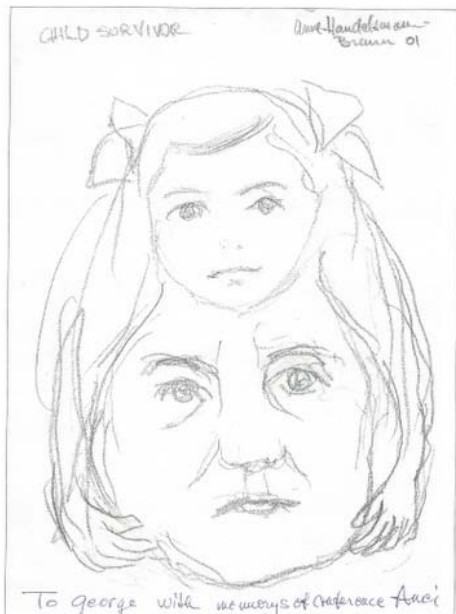
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An anecdote about Picasso's *Guernica* highlights how visual art can, and does, stir deep feelings that demand responses from both artist and viewer: when a Nazi official entered Picasso's studio during the occupation of Paris he asked the artist, pointing to a photo of *Guernica*, 'Did you do this?' Picasso's alleged response was 'No, you did!'

Art, attributed or anonymous, creates a special relationship between the artist and the viewer. In moments of private communication, many fleeting acts of giving and receiving become the subtle exchange of private, even intimate, impressions between them.

An artist's creative impulse sets in motion what has been called the 'social capital' of art: increased self-understanding, reconnection with fragments from the past, vitalizing trauma's numbing effects, nurturing deeper connections in communities as enriching skills pass from generation to generation. Such artworks can be planned, worked at day-in-day-out for weeks, months or longer.

In contrast, child Holocaust survivor Anne Handelsmann-Braun's haunting self-portrait (Heirloom, p67-69), took only fifteen minutes. Yet, as her nephew, I have been witness to her decades-long silent struggles, whose source and nature were unknown to her, or her loved ones, or to me. Such is the far-reaching impact of Holocaust trauma, often a private, internal, silent struggle. Yet, by her own account, those fifteen minutes she drew her self-portrait changed her life. A few years after, when I asked her to recount her experience, Anne reflected on the drawing she completed following a group meeting of child survivors.



'At this stage I stopped. I felt it was finished. I looked at my watch; the whole process took fifteen minutes. I totally lost track of the time. I drew a deep breath and joined the group to say Goodbye.'

The drawing marked a turning point in my creative artistic life. I became less critical and much more intuitive, experimental and playful in my artwork – a bit like a child who, upon picking up a pencil for the first time, discovers the joy of drawing.'

While not all of us are artists, yet our artistic activity shares some features in common, an expression of our inner self. Maybe 'trauma art', art that struggles to find expression of silent suffering arises from a unique psychic space and should be distinguished from ordinary (non-trauma) art.

The concept of 'trauma art' raises important questions: What defines trauma art? Can, or should, such art represent atrocity? Is Holocaust survivor art a yet-to-be defined dimension of witnesses' 'testimony'? What ethical guidelines govern the artist's relationship to such art? Does a viewer, who imagines his or her way into the artist's mindscape, like a visitor to the landscape of the death

camps, become a witness, obligated to share that experience, to remember for the future?

It is precisely that moment when human experience can find no words, no language to adequately convey the overwhelming of the senses, that is called the traumatic moment, that the body translates those numbed senses into other body-languages. The wisdom of our body languages remember those traumatic experiences, decades, even generations after, passed over between the generations in many ways: movement's changing flow and rhythm, or, in the extreme, paralysis; voice's altered tempo, tone, pitch or volume, or silence. Together they tell the story of the body's changing rhythms, the response to trauma, as we hold our breath, or it takes our breath away. Breathless. Some simply faint.

Over time, sometimes decades after, as the artistic creation is actualized, trauma art reveals to the artist, no less than the viewer, these complex layers of a hidden order, often in dreams, nightmares or night-terrors.

Traces of trauma impact like emotional shrapnel in the artists mind and soul. The truth of that trauma can be silenced and left in obscurity for decades, or generations. However, in some survivors, gradually the truth emerges to shape a new self-understanding that finally, when it does find expression, sees the light of day and prompts passers-by to say: 'Oh, now I see!' That was my experience when I reflected deeply on my aunt's artwork.

That is the transformative power of trauma art, to transform the artist and the viewer.

Each generation responds to its traumatic experiences through the visual arts in a variety of private and public ways. Memory refuses to let go of those traumatic experiences that, like emotional shrapnel in our minds, serve as ongoing reminders of ordeals and endurance and resistance to humiliation, shame, loss or abandonment, betrayal or helplessness. These fragments of experience are the shrapnel of psychic trauma, as surely as torn skin and muscles, suffocation or burning, broken bones and ruptured tendons mark physical trauma.

In 2007, a unique partnership between one of the largest psychiatric art collections comprising over 12,000 works, the

Cunningham Dax Collection (CDC), Melbourne, Australia, and the Melbourne Jewish Holocaust Museum saw the realization of the vision of the former's Director, Dr Eugen Koh, to acquire works by survivors of the Holocaust. This is Dr Koh's hope, to raise public awareness of the importance of psychological trauma.

Why this partnership now?

The partnership resulted from the appreciation by both institutions of a sense of 'double urgency'. First, despite the refrain after the Holocaust 'never again', it has become a cliché, tragically, as we witness around the world on-going genocides; second, the reality is that with each day passing the number of Holocaust survivors diminish. Each day, fewer and fewer visual voices can claim to tell the story with the authority that can only come from saying 'I was there'. That story, told by Holocaust survivors, adults and children, the second and third generation, expressed in visual art is the direct request from this unique partnership.

Driven by this sense of dual urgency, the directors and staff of both institutions invite the members of Holocaust communities, locally, nationally and internationally to consider themselves as potential artists who could donate their trauma art to broaden the Collection.

The long-term aim is to select such works as part of planned exhibitions beginning in 2009. The Holocaust art work will form part of a larger exhibition which will include creative works of traumatic experiences through survival of war, refugees and asylum seekers; Aboriginal people who experienced enforced childhood separations and dispossession ('the stolen generation'); and those who experienced trauma from natural disasters, accidents and illness.

Both as a mental health professional and the son of Holocaust survivors who has witnessed the opportunities for well-being that art provides to victims of trauma, I warmly encourage and invite you to consider the following: to either engage your creative artistic side to find artistic expression of your experiences, or, if you have already completed such creative works, to donate some of them to the Cunningham Dax Collection.

Such an act will not only benefit your well-being, but also enrich, educate and raise awareness of the lasting effects of the emotional

shrapnel of trauma. Then visitors who view future exhibitions will in turn become witnesses to pass on this growing and lasting legacy of understanding to future generations of school-children, tertiary students, teachers and professional groups.

Heirloom. Second anthology of the Melbourne Child Survivors of the Holocaust. Editors, M Elliott-Kleerkoper, H Gershoni, F Kalman. Melbourne: Hybrid Publishers, 2006.