

Thinking the Feminine

Aesthetic Practice as Introduction to Bracha Ettinger and the Concepts of Matrix and Metramorphosis

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Discussing art in the psychoanalytical context is inseparable, to my mind, from debating sexual difference, since we enter the function of art by way of the libido and through the extensions of the psyche closest to the edges of corpo-reality. (Bracha Ettinger, 1996b: 89)

The Matrix is not the opposite of the Phallus; it is rather a supplementary perspective. It grants a different meaning. It draws a different field of desire. The intrauterine feminine/pre-natal encounter represents, and can serve as a model for, the

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essentializing investment in pregnancy as the very core of a woman's femininity. The womb in that case would be a phallic object: something someone possessed or lost. Matrixial theory does, however, raise the structure it reconceives as feminine to the level of a general dimension, element or logic in human subjectivity. According to the Matrix, the signifier of this dimension of severality and jointness-in-separation, the making of life cannot be grasped without its distinctive severality, its jointness-in-separateness. It is this structure of severality/encounter – not any organ or anatomy – that

we who look back at the photographic archives of the atrocities of the 20th

phrasing (Ettinger, 1993b: 11/2000c: 12). This materialization of such a paradox through her specific art-making process marks a crucial move beyond fetishistic commemoration with its stalling of time, its attempted stay of execution, its disavowal of knowledge of the dreadful, unimaginable death before which the phallic subject revolts before the abjected other or fetishistically protects itself. To remember the obliterated drastically calls for an intersubjective respons-ability to the trauma of the other.

The partially constituted, disintegrating trace image is, however, bathed in a veil of colour created by the pulsing repetition of tiny horizontal paint-laden brush strokes that weave an incomplete coloured membrane across the screen that is the impossible point of meeting between the apparition, tipped into the visible field of art from the suspended but decisive moment on the edge of that traumatic death, and the incoming gaze of the artist, the child of

the *Borgo* and the passive blank beauty of the *Three Graces*, the artist reaches out to a trio she has found within a horrific artifact of genocide. In this terrifying procession to a horrible death, the artist returns again and again to a woman with her head averted whom she calls 'no-face': what does she look at? The artist says: what she sees is inhuman (Ettinger, 1993b: 85/2000b: 111). The artist also stays with a woman clutching her child, and a woman in desperate appeal turned towards the photographing other aligned with whose genocidal gaze – who took this photograph must always be a question when dealing with this archive – we now helplessly look on. In a series of over 30 paintings returning to this tiny document from this archive, there are infinite ways the painter has discovered to refuse to abandon these women at the mouth of hell, to resist killing these Eurydices once again with a naked Orphic look. Not so much veiled but clothed in the grief colours of her shared mourning, the painter journeys – she says

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of feminine difference, ethics and creativity, so that the very possibility of psychoanalysis to address the question of subjectivity, nourished by the aesthetic, receives new meaning, and from an angle that shifts the field in such a way that an entire range of philosophical as well as clinical questions and possibilities arise. The matrixial feminine becomes a means to think 'after Auschwitz': that is both to think about a world reshaped by that catastrophic rupture, and to theorize the structure of its trauma to which we are now orphaned and bereaved heirs. This concerns not a fetishization of

A future has to be made, for Freud has taught us that we are, without analysis, the prisoners of the past.

Bracha Ettinger's artworking both aesthetically and theoretically creates a means of escaping from the effacement of meaning, an effacement that she associated with the effacement of a certain femininity, but also an effacement of human commonality which heralded the end of ethics. Art is the place, the move, the act that first permits us to signify the 'impossible' *jouissance* and 'impossible' rapport, and to bring something from/of them into light. As an artist Bracha Ettinger has grasped this gravity of the philosophical predicaments of the West after Auschwitz, and through intense work as an artist of the second generation of the Holocaust survivors and as a practising analyst, she has come maybe closer than anyone other than the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, to imagining/theorizing a future that can reconstruct a basis for ethical existence, founded, for her, in the awareness of matrixial trans-subjectivity and of metamorphic borderlinking between partial-subjects, I and non-I, me and the stranger, not just at the borderspaces of becoming but also of disappearance and of dying. (Building on the co-affectivity of becoming, her work on the Holocaust links with Antigone and Eurydice in the matter of disappearance/death.) Thus, the ethical and political implications of her writings/art take the present volume close to the writings of Levinas and of the writer Edmond Jabès (parts of their conversations with Bracha Ettinger have been published, see Ettinger, 1997; Jabès, 1992) while, nonetheless, dislodging their moves by the specific attention it pays to the feminine. But why is this possibility of a future in the feminine via the ideas of Matrix and Metamorphosis so crucial?³

It is through linking the questions of trauma and the feminine that Bracha Ettinger's work unexpectedly brings Levinas and Lacan into a creative conjunction. Both thinkers met a limit in their thought, which is, precisely, the unthinkability of a feminine they placed nonetheless in strategic otherness. The feminine for both was a limit they could/would not transcend even while their thoughts led both of them towards this dangerous terrain – dangerous, however, only within the phallic universe. In his last works, Lacan began to question his own thoughts, criticizing his in-

relation as feminine. I interpret even the relation of filiation as feminine-matrixial; the father/son relation of filiation is 'a woman'.

And Levinas, finally agreeing again to speak of the feminine, says:

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takes contemporary philosophical efforts to suspend the oppositional logic, within which the Symbolic of the 20th century has been held, in a new direction. It opens up the means to operate within non-phallic relations of difference that can be thought through a non-phallic prism of sexual difference. These non-phallic relations of difference can resonate across the always

to awareness-becoming-recognition of presence in absence, while the phallic stratum of subjectivisation allows for distinct alternations between subject and Other, relations and non-relations, presence and absence. [In the Matrix] several partial subjects are parts of the same stratum, sharing and shared by the same borderlinks. Traces belonging to the co-emerging *I* and *non-I* – recorded in joint borderspace – can be redistributed after their initial distribution. In addition, passages are made between the matrixial stratum and the

hallucination is tracked back to a childhood event and she feels 'relieved'. But this is not the final resolution – there is no cure – but the journey must go further backwards and forwards until the nature of the writer's relation with her 'divorced' Catholic mother grieving for her prematurely dead first-born, hating her separated, consumptive husband is finally recalled in a chilling moment of unremembered revelation when the author was 14: since the mother found herself pregnant with the child of a tubercular man she was leaving, she attempted repeatedly to abort her child: the author herself. The writer's psychotic collapse into a permanent haemorrhaging of her own womb was the dormant, forward-thrown register of the traumatic co-event of what we might now read as the murderous rupture in the matrixial dimension.

Thus for Bracha Ettinger, the matrixial situation is not determinate in the nature of its effects, except in so far as the recognition that there are

Matrix is an unconscious space of simultaneous emergence and fading of the I and the unknown non-I which is neither fused nor rejected. (Ettinger, 1996a: 125)

Now comes the introduction of a second term, the figure of this matrixial co-subjectivity. Matrix is based on:

. . . feminine/prenatal inter-relations and exhibits a shared borderspace in which what I call *differentiation in co-emergence* and *distance in proximity* are continuously reformed and reorganised by **metramorphosis** . . . created by and further creating relations without relating on the borderspace of presence/absence subject/object, me and the stranger. In the unconscious mind, the matrixial borderline dimension, involved in the prolnon tj Taeating rj T* 0.15490T

Metamorphosis is the process of change in borderlines and thresholds between being and absence, memory and oblivion, *I* and *non-I*, a process of transgression and fading away. The metamorphic consciousness has no centre, cannot hold a fixed gaze – or if it has a centre, it constantly slides to the borderlines, to the margins. Its gaze escapes the margins and returns to the margins. Through this process the limits, borderlines, and thresholds conceived are constantly transgressed or dissolved, thus allowing the creation

language: the semiotic and the symbolic. As part of the Symbolic (in the

answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is “What does a Woman want?”’ (Freud, 1953–7 [1937]: 474). Emblematically cited

real issues, we politick in the name of a category, women, we know theoretically to be deeply problematic. 'Woman' cannot *be*, fissured as real social subjects are by divisions of class, ethnicity, culture, history, sexuality, ability and other determining markers of the social and cultural. Furthermore, following the psycho-semiotics of Julia Kristeva, writing already in

which phallic meaning emerges, the feminine is pre-/non-human, yet a necessary otherness of no specific shape or meaning. Women, however, become subjects through submission to the subjectivizing dimension of the phallus and take their place in an order from which the difference of

ur-trauma. As Paul Hirst and Penny Woolley (1982: 160) clearly conclude their study of psychoanalysis and social relations, Freud's theories are radically anti-naturalist and anti-essentialist:

But if Freud is right about human sexuality, there is no given 'nature', a biological realm of possible actions, to be denied. It is not merely that 'incest'

machinic, certainly never clean-cut, risking the necessity for boundary, clarity and division with ambiguity and simultaneity (Kristeva, 1982). Thus, as Simone de Beauvoir (1974) astutely concluded: man's humanity and his

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In 2000, a retrospective exhibition *Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger: Artworking 1985–1999* was held at the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels in planned simultaneity with an exhibition *Azetta* of woven carpets by Berber women

I have named Matrixial borderspace a psychic sphere of encounters of I(s) and non-I(s) where traces, imprints and waves are exchanged and experi-

for feminine subjectivity, and to what an extent creative women were struggling over and over to arrive at some intelligible way of sharing their glimpses into this possibility, and their agony about its lack in culture, at

signifier and the maternal imago in relation to which the daughter finds herself culturally mute and imaginatively hobbled. The daughter's access to her own speech and thoughts requires that this culturally installed distortion of the maternal superego be eternally silenced by a kind of psychic violence that is enacted against part of the feminine self. The necessity of such self-destruction condemns the feminine subject to the typical condition of the depressive, oscillating between a dazzling intellectual display and an inner

generate a dimension of meaning that structures subjectivity or sociality, can once again be traced in another dimension of what, for Julia Kristeva, is the predicament of the feminine. In her article, 'Un nouveau type d'intellectuel: le dissident', first published in the Paris journal *Tel Quel* in the winter of 1977, Kristeva (1986b) wrote concerning Mallarmé's question: *what is there to say regarding childbirth?* She argued that his question is probably just as poignant if not more so than the famous Freudian *Che vuoi?* Julia Kristeva's answer to the question is that here *the desire of the child lays down the law*, resulting in a

an artistic trope since the Renaissance, Juliana Schiesari (1992) addresses the implications of this position in terms of the necessity of rethinking a different kind of symbolic loss. Kristeva's 'matricidal' therapy for depression is shown to be disturbingly complicitous with the same symbolic order that privileges the artistic expression of male melancholia and devalues

Other writers, like Elisabeth Bronfen (1998) for example, have advanced a theory of subject formation via the trauma of the umbilical cut and its scar which marks all bodies in an ungendered way. But whether it is a female organ such as the placenta or an undifferentiated mark/wound like the umbilicus, they both function within a model of presence/absence, severance and loss by castration and hallucinatory return of the repressed. The Matrix, on the other hand, concerns the subjectivizing process of several partial-subjects who cannot ever be entirely thought apart from their *encounter* as subject–subject and not only as subject/object, and where it is *by definition*

its self-investment that was suspended in the 1960s–90s by what now looks interestingly topical as the triumph of lens-based artistic practices: the triumph of the gaze (see Pollock, 1996a).

3. Shortly after completing this article I discovered Josh Cohen (Cohen, 2003), who also seeks to read these authors for a philosophical foundation for thought after Auschwitz as a movement not of completion but of openness, hence futurity.

4. 'And yet psychoanalysis has taught us that this terrifying phantasy is only a
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