



Research Article

Response-art as reflective inquiry: Fostering awareness of racism

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ABSTRACT

Drawings produced in the camps by deportees during the holocaust, or Shoah, provide compelling evidence of the human capacity for violence and destruction. Yet these images also bear witness to the persistence of the forces of life and the survival of the creative impulse. This article discusses the process of witnessing these images of trauma. A closed-group workshop was designed to facilitate some consciousness of external and internal dimensions of racial discrimination. Inscribed within the realm of *postmemory work* the workshop format invites participants to respond to presented drawings from the Ravensbrück concentration camp through visual image-making. In this report of the research undertaken, the context in which the workshop was conceived is firstly considered. Secondly, the research method, including important ethical considerations are described, and results from the thematic analysis presented. Themes related to strong emotional reactions triggered by viewing the drawings and visually responding to them and to different levels of insights are discussed. Implications of results for postmemorial work, awareness of racism and as well as for the development of social justice and equity principles are presented.

Past and current genocidal enterprises driven by racist principles show the destruction of which human beings are capable. The drawings that have reached us from concentration camps in World War II (Amishai-Maisels, 1993; Blatter & Milton, 1981) give testimony to trauma but also bear witness to the persistence of the forces of life and the survival of the creative impulse. What does the process of witnessing or receiving these images “of life within death” (Revault d’Allonnes, 1995) entail? What are some of the ethical implications inherent to using, or perhaps appropriating, images of trauma in research, particularly images produced by the Shoah for researchers who, like us, are not Jewish or who do not have a direct connection with the lived experience of the Holocaust? Given that the drawings made in the camps are images of trauma, does it alter their testimonial function to use them in an attempt not only to raise awareness of racism as the foundation and driving force of the Nazi genocidal enterprise, but also to raise consciousness of the inner racism that affects us all? By inner racism, we mean prejudices, discriminatory and judgmental attitudes, biases, assumptions and preconceptions about the other, for the most part unconscious and invisible to ourselves unless conditions are created for a challenging yet necessary process of self-reflection to take place.

In this article, we firstly outline the personal and professional contexts of this current research. Secondly, we present an overview of the

methodological frame within which the research discussed here unfolded and give particular attention to significant ethical considerations. The discussion of salient thematic analysis results then sets the stage for a reflection on the implications of these results for postmemorial work, awareness of external and internal forms of racist discrimination and the development of a “social justice vision” (Talwar, 2017, p. 102).

Founding context

Personal context

While conducting a research project that required a foray into publications of visual artists, I (first author) came across a book of drawings by the artist Zoran Music, made during his internment at the Dachau concentration camp. The shock was significant and due as much to the Nazi barbarity the drawings reveal as to the power of the historical, narrative and affective burden they bear. The difference between photographed or filmed images, which had already come to my attention, and the drawings I had just discovered was evident: The bodies of the dead and dying lying on the ground at Dachau, *immortalized* by the artist’s hand as the horror was happening and at great risk to his own life, were given final tribute to their fragile and “tragic

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elegance” (Music, 1981, p. 161).

At the time of my encounter with Music’s drawings, the loss, in quick succession, of loved ones was having a profound impact on my family. While grieving for them, I could not fail to recognize the immense symbolic and affective contribution of the burial rituals to which my deceased loved ones had a right and the solace that my family and I would feel. Seeing Music’s drawings emphasized that which should not be a privilege under any circumstances: A death rite. A nameless and faceless death (Arendt, 1994), an immoral sacrilege, is one of the untenable aspects of the cruelty and enormity of the Nazi crime.

Professional context

As an art therapist, I was profoundly touched by the realization that the drawings from the camps were powerful testimonies of the survival of the creative impulse in an environment meant to eradicate not only life but the very will to live (Leclerc, 2011, 2013). Following funded research in memorial archives in France and Germany with the goal to study the survival strategies in portraits drawn by women artists deported from France and imprisoned in Nazi camps, the drawings produced by Violette Rougier-Lecoq, French communist active in the French Resistance, deported to the Ravensbrück concentration camp, were imprinted onto me by their evocative power. Liberated in 1945 by the Swedish Red Cross, Rougier-Lecoq was recruited to represent France during the Hamburg trials; her drawings played a crucial role in the prosecution of eleven SS officials and guards of the Ravensbrück concentration camp. This historical and political testimony has permitted, even if minimally, to counter the grave and terrifying truth about the Shoah, that it is “an event without a witness” (Laub, 1992). It is five of her drawings (see Leclerc, 2011) that are presented in the research workshops that are the subject of this article, and to which participants are invited to respond through visual art making. In addition to the power of these archival testimonies, as a French Canadian with French ancestry, the choice of working with Rougier-Lecoq’s drawings rests on an ethical principle: to avoid using material which is not part of one’s cultural identity.

Conscious effort of memory

The drawings produced by the Shoah are images of trauma. Bearing witness to the horror of the camps and the enormity of the Nazi extermination system, these archival documents attest to what a human being can do to another human being. They expose us to the banality of evil (Arendt, 1963) and make us confront our fundamental vulnerability, exacerbated in the context of extreme violence by the fact that “life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another” (Butler, 2004, p. 29). This is why the authors of this article believe that the effort of memory they require operates on two levels: to ensure that the Nazi genocide will never be forgotten, and to allow consciousness of our human potential to do as much harm as good.

To consider the essential principle of alterity and otherness means recognizing, with Derrida (1995, 2007), the other *to oneself* and the other *in oneself*, and the interdependence between these two registers. That is to say, the violence suffered and the wounds experienced by another will always remain other to us. Likewise, will the harm that we are potentially capable of committing and the prejudice (the inner racist self; see Davids, 2011) we may have against the “feared and unwanted Other” (Sajjani, Marxen, & Zarate, 2017, p. 26); hence the necessity of establishing *methods of reception* so that some awareness of the other to oneself and in oneself can emerge.

As a person bears witness to the witness through a process of both looking at archival documents (such as those from the Shoah) and responding to them by creating an art response (AR), they are called upon to subjectively respond to what the drawings bear witness to just as much as to what enables or impedes their capacity to fully receive them. Indeed, the visual image has the capacity “to touch the viewer

who feels rather than simply sees the event, drawn into the image through a process of affective contagion” (Bennett, 2005, p. 36). In the research workshop discussed here, response-art as an aesthetic strategy toward self-awareness, self-reflection, and transformation rests directly upon this premise.

Theoretical context

At the conceptual level, the workshops’ development is inspired by many essays published in the last few decades on the literature and art of concentration camps, as well as by the art therapy literature on response art, awareness of racist discrimination and social justice approaches. To begin with, a major conceptual shift occurred in the field of Genocide studies and particularly with regards to the Shoah: The irreducibility of survivors’ written and visual testimonies now gives way to the necessity of considering strategies that foster their reception (see Glowacka, 2012; Guerin & Hallas, 2007; Hirsh, 2012; Rothberg, 2000; Saltzman, 2006; van Alphen, 2002; Zelizer, 2001). In the field of art therapy, responding to clinical material through art-making, a process that is known as *response art* (Fish, 2012, 2016), is part of the reflective practice of many art therapists. It is used to gain an understanding of demanding clinical situations, to foster awareness of unconscious material such as transference, countertransference and projective identification, as well as assumptions of the therapist about clients and consequently, to enhance empathy with clients (Drapeau, 2014; Fish, 2012, 2016; Franklin, 2010; Havsteen-Franklin & Altamirano, 2015; McNiff, 2011; Miller, 2007; Moon, 1999; Wadson, 2003).

The research discussed here evolved from the literature that suggests that response art can provide a means to foster the empathic reception of images of trauma. Images of trauma usually engender two types of effects on the viewer: *Emotional overload* which generates excessive identification with the subject of representation, or *emotional distancing* which inhibits affective reaction (Bennett, 2005; Hoffman, 2000; Kapitan, 2007). Both concepts resonate with what Keen (2007) calls *false empathy* and *failed empathy* and both perturb the efforts to remember and to think which the drawings require. Changing the passive, albeit emotionally assailed, position of the receivers of drawings produced by the Shoah in such a way so as to provoke their creative engagement, as “an attuned visual response” to the experience of another (Havsteen-Franklin & Altamirano, 2015, p. 54), RA is likely to generate a deep form of affective resonance.

Accordingly, in a recent study by Betts, Potash, Luke, and Kelso (2015) participants in a control group were invited to view the permanent exhibition at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, and participants in an experimental group, to create art inspired by their emotional response to viewing the exhibit, engage in reflective writing in association to their RA and partake in a group discussion. While results suggest that all participants showed empathy, they also show those from the experimental group “experienced significant [although moderate] increases in immediate empathy” (p. 21) and their affective response persisted over a period of 12 months. We uphold these results also suggest that by engaging the subject on a physical, sensorial, affective, and psychical level, the experiential nature of response-art may act, in the best of cases, as an impetus and mobilize the receiver’s epistemological position (Leclerc, 2012). Furthermore, it seems that reflecting on one’s own emotional experience through art making may, as stated by the authors: “(...) inspire empathy, lead to new insights, and promote social responsibility” (Betts et al., 2015, p. 24). Such statement resonates with the concept of *postmemory work*, a term coined by Hirsch (2001, 2012).

Postmemory work “strives to reactivate and re-embody more distant political and cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression” (Hirsch, 2012, p. 33). In a sense, postmemory work entails being accountable for, that is taking responsibility for what images of

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