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A Visual Dialogue: What are the Inter Relational Dynamics of Grief?

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*Abstract: In contemporary society, grief is a universal and multi-faceted human response to significant personal change or loss such as the death of a loved one, separation, or divorce. This paper will argue that inter-relational dynamics of grief can be communicated visually through patterns of perception and experience. It will consider both private/personal and public methodologies used by international artists to contextualise grief in their work with reference to their chosen materials, and their use of surface and textural renderings. Sophie Calle, a French conceptual artist depicting human vulnerability, examines identity and intimacy by creating an art book from a personal diary entitled *Exquisite Pain* 2003, which blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction. Similarly, another French artist, Christian Boltanski portrays loss and grief in his work; *Personnes* 2010, a singular ephemeral work that questions fate and ineluctable death. Conversely, other artists use a form of public installation art, where the importance of space, film sets, and the role of the materiality are all key elements. Memorials of architectural structures and universal landmarks have played a significant role in loss and grief. Both Callum Morton and Gordon Matter-Clark investigate the links between architectural elements and suspenseful or dramatic, spaces, which are often reminiscent of the mystery of the absent person. Through an awareness of how people move, perform and react to particular spaces, they explore the relationship between private and public space, interior and exterior, and reality and illusion.*

Keywords: Grief and Loss, Contemporary Art Practice, Private/Personal and Public Methodology, Relationship between Reality and Illusion, Calle, Boltanski, Salcedo, Morton and Matta-Clark

IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY, grief is a multi-faceted human response to significant personal change or loss such as the death of a loved one, separation, or divorce. This paper will argue that inter-relational dynamics of grief can be communicated visually through set patterns of perception and experience. Inter relational dynamics of grief refer specifically to mentally and emotionally challenging responses to particular life experiences and an understanding of how the elements and constructs of life relate to each other to form behaviour. Memorials of architectural structures and universal landmarks have played a significant role in loss and grief. How could we forget the Dresden Cathedral facade, left as a poignant reminder of the WW11 bombings and more recently, the installation of two major beams of lights that project into the night sky creating a ghostly image of the Twin Towers in New York?

This paper will consider both private or personal and public methodologies used by five (5) international artists to contextualise grief in their work with reference to their chosen materials, and their use of surface and textural renderings. I shall attempt to underline the conceptual link, which ties the private to the public.

Sophie Calle, a French conceptual artist depicting human vulnerability, examines identity and intimacy by creating a personalised art book in her own diary entitled *Exquisite Pain* 2003 which blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction. Drawing from her own personal

experience of being a jilted lover, she documents her feelings by recreating and reconstructing memories from objects, stories, and photographs. This reflective critique of an intense period of the loss of a relationship becomes a form of private documentation showing the evolutionary stages of grief.

Another French artist, Christian Boltanski, portrays instead a sense of collective loss and grief in his installation entitled *Personnes* 2010, a singular ephemeral work that questions fate and ineluctable death. Public installation art has been embraced globally as a methodology to re-create an experience where the importance of space, film sets, and the role of materiality are all key elements.

Two other artists, Australian Callum Morton and American Gordon Matter-Clark investigate the links which can exist between the elements of architectural and the uncertain. They create ambiguous, yet striking spaces which are often reminiscent of the mystery of the absent person. Through an awareness of how people move, perform and react to particular spaces, they explore the relationship between private and public space, interior and exterior, and reality and illusion. Finally, South American Doris Salcedo's work captures the solemn memory of past violent deaths and atrocities.

It is Sophie Calle who, by subtly incorporating 'connection and association', encapsulates the essence of grief and allows the audience to consider different perspectives and responses relating to a particular experience. Journalist, Amelia Gentleman states that Calle's work reflects the suffering that comes with the end of a relationship... (and) from a creative point of view', and she adds, 'the worse the breakup, the better the art' (2004, p. 31). Her art book, *Exquisite Pain* (2003), is the product of a period of intense grief she experienced twenty years earlier- a time when she packed up everything associated with the relationship and its end, and left it untouched until she felt strong enough to deal with it. Arguably, Sophie Calle's approach to her work is similar to that of an investigative reporter. Her methods analyse characters through objective means such as recording, documentation, and interviewing. *Exquisite Pain* (2003) resulted from her past lover's failure to meet her in New Delhi. On each day of her journey, she had documented her feelings about how she was looking forward to seeing him. Calle recreates and reconstructs memories from objects, stories, and photographs that she had taken herself. She wrote the text in 2003 and this eventually became a book, which also referenced other people's memories including a woman who had given birth to a dead child, and a boy who had heard that his father had died. Calle states that these stories helped to contextualise her pain and to make it more manageable.

On a larger scale, Christian Boltanski stages situations and spaces to evoke and question powerful parameters of human existence such as lifespan, identity, the body, death, and its legacy. Many of his works are site specific such as *Personnes* in the Grand Palais in Paris, embracing the whole of the immense central space of the edifice. His installation is conceived as a powerful physical and psychological experience, exploring the nature and meaning of human existence. By using sound and vision, he evokes social, religious, and humanistic explorations of life, memory, death, chance and destiny. Boltanski forces the viewer to become a part of the living dramatisation of art and memory. Entering the installation, the viewers, through their own experiences and consciousness, question the meaning of human destiny and the right of every individual to a place in the collective memory.

In a similar way, Callum Morton forces the audience to engage physically in the actual architectural space of his installation. Through Morton's fascination with twentieth-century Modernist architecture, writer Juliana Engberg postulates that Morton is 'frequently drawn

to the mystery of the absent person'... In particular he has been especially compelled to investigate the links between architectural elements and suspenseful, or dramatic, murderous spaces' (2009, p. 7).

According to Engberg, Morton delivers a traumatic spectacle of domestic destruction-a ruined site, a collapsed home and a new fantasy. Morton describes his reaction when he drove up the inner city street that he lived in, almost thirty years ago:

I wanted to see the house my architect father built and designed for the whole family. I was shocked to discover that all that remained of the house was a vacant overgrown block-a hole, no less. The longer I thought about this house the more I realised how it still exercised a significant influence on what I do. Its image had haunted my dreams for years, as much a result of the trauma involved in its loss, particularly for my mother. (2007, p. 110)

Implicit in the work of both Boltanski and Morton is the impact of the visual spectacle. Guy Debord in his book, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), argues that the development of a modern society replaces authentic life with its representation. He notes that without such authenticity, human perceptions are affected and bring about a sense of self-consciousness of existence within a particular environment. In other words, our experience determines how we see things (Debord 1967, p. 33).

In a different way, American artist Gordon Matta-Clark broke from this path of creating architectural art by using buildings about to be destroyed. He forced his way into abandoned apartment buildings and warehouses in New York and, using a chainsaw, sliced up walls and floors, exposing the structures skeletal core. Overcoming the environment in a very physical way, Matta-Clark reminds us that space is seen by the movements of the viewer's eyes and by the body's place in time. By altering and re-contextualising these architectural forms into new, alternative forms of expression, his 'extractions' alter spaces, places, and perception. In 1974, his major work shifted to suburban homes. Titled *Splitting*, the work consisted of cutting a vertical line through the entire width of a house. Because of the ephemeral nature of these interventions, Matta-Clark utilised photography to document these 'building cuts' as a social critique of the standardised suburban architecture that became common across America during the post-war decades.

Commenting on the *New York Times* in March 2007, in reference to a retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Nicolai Ouroussoff notes,

Matta-Clark creates a theme of transcendence through the ordinary choice of subject matter: abandoned buildings and warehouses that, after his transformations, were usually demolished and forgotten. The cuts also conveyed a transforming of the materials, their texture being exposed through ripped wallpaper, plaster, and stud walls. They sensitise the viewer to the world around them, to the structural and social glue that holds disparate elements together. (2007 n.p.)

My latest research has led me to Colombian artist Doris Salcedo's visually captivating work, which consistently addresses acute sorrow of loss and mourning. By drawing on complex ideas which link her art to poetry and philosophy, Salcedo is able to physically embody actual experiences and testimonies into her sculptures. The power of her work is in its ability

to convey the essence rather than the actual testimonies. By using everyday domestic and personal items, such as furniture and clothing, organic substances such as hair, bone and animal fibre, she is able to bring together works that address loss, grief, pain, memory, absence and mourning. Her research involves listening to survivors of violent atrocities at the hands of military or government agencies, usually throughout Latin America. These accounts are transformed into restrained but powerful memorials to those who have lost their lives. Unlike the idea of the monument which restores or preserves memory as part of a cultural heritage, the work of Doris Salcedo exposes the silent history revealed in individual memory.

Jill Bennett in her book *Emphatic Vision* states

Salcedo addresses an issue normally outside the purview of artists who are deemed to work in an expressive or subjective vein: that of the interrelationship between the artist and others. That is to say, by exploring ways in which the artist can encounter the trauma of others, she gives consideration to the ways in which a secondary witness and a spectator is positioned in relation to that trauma, and also to the way in which an affective response might be triggered through visual imagery. (2005, p. 52)

Salcedo's work plays on the notion of 'familiar made strange' through the meeting of opposites, the human and the inhuman, or organic and inorganic substances. Her sculptures consist of materials such as wood, metal, concrete, bone and animal membrane. The juxtapositions of these substances in her work create both a perceptual and experiential paradox – one that is out of the ordinary and unsettling. In her work, there is a fluctuation between visibility and invisibility, between what is revealed and what remains hidden. This is apparent both formally in the materials of the sculpture and in terms of the testimonies she has collected.

Salcedo's work presents the experiences of these testimonies as immediate reality not as historic events, they encapsulate an absence, by manifesting those experiences of violent death, torture or disappearance of a loved one. As Jill Bennett states "Salcedo's work engages in a slower process of perception, in which the transformation of the object is itself gradually apprehended rather than instantly recognizable... the visual analogy registers the way things change when loss is experienced" (2005, p. 63).

Grief in art as a universal condition has been investigated in painting, printmaking, photography, and sculpture, but arguably, it has been the death of a loved one that has been the main source of inspiration for visual artists. As a theme, my paper has underlined the ways that contemporary artists have investigated grief as multi-layered phenomena as their work speaks of a painful personal journey and yet reflects the greater universal theme of grief through loss and its emotive experience. While in a literary context, grief has been a common genre but it has only recently re-gained significance in contemporary twentieth century visual arts practice. Perhaps this is related to the social, economic and political upheavals of the last decade. Psychologist John Archer reports that grief is a universal experience in the human species, but explains that the experience involves two processes: one of active distress, search, and anger; and the second process characterised by an inactive, depressed state. He argues that a complex set of reactions is added involving a change in the personal identity of the afflicted. He further examines the physical and the mental process involved in grieving and considers how the nature of grief is determined by the kinds of relationships experienced, whether it resulted from the loss of spouses, children, relatives or friends.

In my work as a sculptor, I draw upon my own personal experience of divorce and the grief that followed to project a universal human experience, not limited by gender, time, or place. The rationale for my visual arts doctorate work is based on the premise that broken relationships in today's society are one of the major traumas in an individual's personal life. It is a subject that has received little attention in contemporary Australian visual arts practice.

The central focus of my studio research project is *the house*, as it is a symbol of the experience, desires, dreams, and values imbedded in a marital relationship. Values of security, longevity, and solidarity are all strengths, which are integral parts of a strong relationship. In sculptural terms, it provides an innovative visual dialogue and insight into the grief process through manipulation and/or juxtaposition of materials and objects, textures, surface renderings, mass and spatial volumes. The main aim of this sculptural research project was to articulate how a three-dimensional installation work could effectively symbolise, in visual terms, the emotional grief and trauma felt during and after a relationship break down and could epitomise the potential impact upon individual stakeholders. Whether by the use of personal/private or public methodologies, the crucial feature is that the person has lost an essential part of what has become, in terms of inner experience, part of his or her life. According to Archer, the process of dealing with these life challenges occurs when we are forced by circumstances to change any of the fundamental assumptions we hold about our personal world, and hence our identity.

In summary, through visual arts practice, artists struggle to question the notion of grief, and through the use of varying methodologies they have enabled their individual works to communicate directly to the audience. Artists must investigate and challenge the destructive forces in human experience and confront our sense of humanity, our ethics and our moral obligations.

Acknowledgement

Jill Bennett states that "she seeks to show, how, by realizing a way of seeing and feeling, this art makes a particular kind of contribution to thought, and to politics specifically: how certain conjunctions of affective and critical operations might constitute the basis for something we can call emphatic vision." (2005, p. 21)

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Images

Fig 1: Dresden Cathedral was Left in Ruins for Decades as a War Memorial

Fig 2: *The Tribute in Light* memorial. New York. 2007

Fig 3: Sophie Calle, *Exquisite Pain*, 2003

Fig 4: Christian Boltanski, *Personnes*, 2010

Fig 5: Sophie Calle, *Exquisite Pain Exhibition*, 2007

Fig 6: *Personnes*, Grand Palais, Paris 2010

Fig 7: Callum Morton, *Valhalla*, 2007

Fig 8: Gordon Matta-Clark, *Splitting*, 1974

Fig 9: Doris Salcedo, Installation for the 8th International Istanbul Biennial, 2003

Fig 10: Brian Sanstrom, *The Impact between F5*, 2010

Fig 11: Brian Sanstrom, *The Impact between F5*, 2010

About the Author

Brian Sanstrom

I am currently undertaking a Doctor of Philosophy at the Queensland College of Art with the assistance of a Higher Degree Research scholarship. My research will develop a series of investigations based on a more conceptual consideration of the notion of 'loss'. My studio work will negotiate how the 'space' between deconstruction and reconstruction can create a narrative—a sense of loss, an emptiness, a spiritual void. I plan to further explore the dichotomy that can be constructed between the concept of presence and absence, reality and illusion, loss and regeneration, through the manipulation of structure and space. My work will investigate the relationships between people, objects and structural environments.