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Touching Trauma: On the Artistic Gesture of Bracha L. Ettinger

In painting, the touch changes the thought and goes elsewhere;
the thought alters and returns to the touch.
B.L. Ettinger: *The Matrixial Borderspace*[1]

Ettinger directs us aesthetically away from content towards
gesture.
G. Pollock: *After-affects / After-images…*[2]

Touching the Inconceivable

"[T]ouching trauma."[3] These words, inscribed in purple ink in one of Bracha L. Ettinger's notebooks, indicate an origin and a direction of her work. A Lacanian psychoanalyst, theorist, and artist, Ettinger claims that when approaching art openly, we may encounter traces of events we have not experienced: the events of the anonymous Others. This exact fragilising and tangible occurrence in severality is conceptualised in the matrixial psychoanalysis she introduces.

[1] B.L. Ettinger: "The With-In-Visible Screen." In: Eadem: *The Matrixial Borderspace*, ed. B. Massumi. Minneapolis–London 2006, p. 94.

[2] G. Pollock: "Introduction: Trauma and Artworking." In: Eadem: *After-affects / After-images. Trauma and Aesthetic Transformation in the Virtual Feminist Museum*. Manchester–New York 2013, p. 3. Emphasis in the original.

[3] B.L. Ettinger: *Notebook*, 2006, water, Indian ink, fountain pen, pencil, double-page spread from 15.3x11.2 cm notebook. In: C. de Zegher, G. Pollock (eds.): *Art as Compassion: Bracha L. Ettinger.* Brussels 2012, pp. 104–105. © Courtesy of the artist. See: Figure 1.

In this affirmative apparatus, the gesture of *touching* trauma is indeed possible, but also, more significantly, if one already touches it, one cannot return to the previous, pre-connected state. When one touches the disruptive, traumatic knowledge of the *non-I*, one is simultaneously touched by it; then, one has to pass it on, since in the matrixial realm of mutual influences and of the *impossibility of not-sharing* one cannot remain indifferent.

In this article, I wish to look at Ettinger's artistic gesture and its potentialities through the prism of the matrixial theory. Bracha L. Ettinger is an Israeli artist, psychoanalyst, theorist, feminist, and daughter of Holocaust survivors. Her matrixial theory poses a supplement to the Freudian-Lacanian thought, introducing the space of the feminine non-phallic difference and the *matrix* – the signifier of this difference. In such a sphere – inspired by the encounter-event of pregnancy and the prenatal period – a subjectivising encounter between the becoming-*I* and the becoming-*non-I* takes place; as a result, before and beyond the series of cuts and separations, another instance of subjectivity-formation is theorised – one grounded upon such an encounter. I will endeavour to demonstrate that gesture signifies extreme proximity to traumatic events and that it may suspend the viewer, be it in his or her gaze, or between the seemingly binary notions of now/then, or presence/absence. More specifically, I will try to show that gesture has the potential of sending us beyond – it can move us towards the disruptive experience. Yet, before we proceed, it ought to be clarified what the term *gesture* means in this context. My aim is not to explore or theorise the very movements of the artist. In the pieces that will be used here, we cannot re-create any gestures, since we neither can find them directly on the surface of the artwork nor have observed them in the process of making it. Still, what we can trace is their outcome – art becomes the index of its production. Griselda Pollock's words used as a motto can clarify it; we read: "Ettinger directs us aesthetically away from content towards *gesture*." Indeed, it is the very act that matters, which is why in this article gesture becomes the indexical trope embracing both the procedure (which gives life to the artwork) and its implications. Even though we do not witness the moment of creation personally, we see the effects, we possibly sense the affects, and – when applying the theory – we reveal certain prospects of artworking itself.

In order to prove my thesis, first I wish to tackle the questions of Ettinger's artistic technique, the mixture of traumas found in her art, and the notion of memory. Thereafter, I will proceed to the reading of chosen paintings from Ettinger's most famous series, *Eurydice*, based on the photograph of the execution of women and children from the Mizocz ghetto in 1942, and of selected artworks with a mother theme in the context of, among others, the *trauma of the World* and the *fort/da* game. Finally, humanising aspects of the chosen concepts in Ettinger's theory that are directly linked to art will be discussed. I propose to read Ettinger's art through her own apparatus since in this case art ought not

to be separated from theory. Ettinger argues: "While painting produces theory, theory casts light on painting in a backward projection. […] For me, painting and theory are not different aspects that attest to the *same* thing, but are rather differentiated levels of working-through."[4] Thus, these two instances are treated as interconnected, mutually affective figures, and their interaction may produce interesting results and implications.

Traumatic Assemblage

How does Ettinger's art come into being? The whole process begins with a photocopy machine, with which the author manipulates the photographs; namely, she stops the machine before the copy is ready. Accordingly, the images that resurface are distorted and incomplete. As Brian Massumi stresses, "The image has degenerated. But it hasn't disappeared. […] [I]t has been caught appearing."[5] Importantly enough, in this act, Ettinger does not attempt to rethink or disturb the copy versus original problem, but instead "the suspension itself becomes the issue."[6] The result is arrested between these two stages, hence being neither of them. Thereafter, the artist proceeds to put layers of paint on the image, which is a long-lasting and repetitive procedure. More and more layers are produced; some fragments are abraded, but then this space is overlaid again. Massumi describes Ettinger's technique as *machinic* because the pattern of brushing is either horizontal or vertical.[7] The final effect – even though it is hard to call these paintings final due to the duration of their creation – is, as Massumi argues, "less the image than the sensation of its remaining in its fading, re-arising: *rhythm*."[8] Thus, these pulsating artworks produce a certain experience or an affect, due to which the visible content becomes less significant.

What is revealed in Ettinger's art is her experience of belonging to the Second Generation after the Holocaust. Her Jewish-Polish parents – Bluma and Uziel Lichtenberg – lived in Łódź, Poland before the Second World War. Unlike most of their family members, who were killed either in ghettoes or in concentration camps, after numerous struggles they managed to survive the war and moved to Palestine, where Bracha was born in 1948.[9] Even though Ettinger

[4] B.L. Ettinger: "The With-In-Visible Screen…," p. 94. Emphasis in the original.

[5] B. Massumi: "Afterword. Painting: The Voice of the Grain." In: *The Matrixial Borderspace…*, p. 201.

[6] Ibidem, p. 202.

[7] Ibidem.

[8] Ibidem, p. 203. Emphasis mine.

[9] A short biographical note based on: C. de Zegher, G. Pollock (eds.): *Art as Compassion…*, p. 249.

has not experienced the Holocaust personally, it is the event – or the "communal trauma"[10] – that has a tremendous impact on her art. The trauma of the war is visible in the themes of her paintings. One of the photographs she frequently uses as a background is the picture of her parents taken in Łódź in 1936.[11] Another image is the mentioned depiction of a group of naked women from the Mizocz ghetto in Ukraine that are to be executed[12]; they stand very close to one another, whereas some of them carry children in their arms. This photograph forms Ettinger's most widely recognised series – *Eurydice*.

Trauma is the subject that Ettinger touches upon not only in her art, but also in the theory she proposes. To put it briefly, what Ettinger theorises is the sphere of the matrix: the space of encounter with the *non-I* grounded upon the late prenatal encounter between the mother and child. Such a sphere facilitates sharing and transformation. Going beyond – and before – separation, binaries, and linguistic structures theorised in Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis, the matrix embraces connectedness, proximity, severality, and openness towards the Other. Due to almost boundless closeness – which is a prerequisite for entering this subjectivising stratum – and the possibility of transferring the disruptive traces of knowledge coming from the *non-I*, the matrix is traumatic in itself, inconceivable, and precarious. Such a conceptualised sphere makes it possible to explore the issue of trauma of proximity.[13] Thus, the trauma of closeness, communication outside language, and fragility seems to be an integral part of the matrixial theory; we may go as far as to pronounce it the trauma of origin, in view of its associations with the intrauterine experience.

What we may see in Ettinger's artistic and theoretical activities is *sui generis* trans-traumatic interweaving. Both in theory and in art, Ettinger weaves the trauma of her parents – the inherited (post)memory of the Holocaust – with the trauma of the matrixial sphere. These traumas indeed cooperate with-in different fields of her activity, yet they do not fuse entirely since it is still possible to distinguish them. As it has been noted above, the matrixial sphere of

[10] B. Massumi: "Afterword…," p. 212.

[11] See: G. Pollock: "A Matrixial Installation: Artworking in the Freudian Space of Memory and Migration." In: *Art as Compassion*…, p. 200.

[12] The original photograph is available in the online archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Reference number of the photograph: #17877.

[13] Notions of *trauma of proximity* and *proximity to trauma* are proposed and explored in my article: A. Kisiel: "Uraz – bliskość – nie-pamięć. Psychoanalityczny dyskurs traumy od Freuda do Ettinger." *Narracje o Zagładzie* 2016, no. 2, pp. 115–132 (in Polish). Another reading of the relation between trauma and proximity is proposed by Ettinger. She introduces "a *triple trauma* of maternity and prematernity: the traumatic proximity to the Other during pregnancy, the traumatic regression to a similar archaic sharing […] and the traumatic separation from the *non-I* during birth-giving." B.L. Ettinger: "From Proto-ethical Compassion to Responsibility: Besideness and the Three *Primal* Mother-phantasies of Not-enoughness, Devouring and Abandonment." *Athena* 2006, no. 1, p. 105. Emphasis in the original.

proximity is traumatic *per se* because it challenges the borders of the (seemingly stable) *I*; simultaneously, in such a realm one may also receive the message that is traumatic in a historical sense. In Ettinger's art, the fragments that can be linked to the historical trauma of the author, such as photographs of her mother or the women from the ghetto, are hidden under the layers of paint; these, in turn, constitute a pulsating, intense, *rhythmical* (in Massumi's understanding) image, which may evoke the connotations with the intrauterine sphere. Ultimately, in such a theoretical-aesthetical combination, traumas in their various understandings intertwine with each other, producing a complex rhizomatic structure.

As it has been mentioned above, Ettinger's art incorporates certain postmemorial traces. With regard to this statement, the Hirschian notion of postmemory ought to be collated with matrixial memory. Postmemory is a framework of transmission of historical trauma from one generation to another, grounded upon the proximity between them. Precisely, people who live in unceasing closeness to the torment of others produce their own recollections of the wounding experiences. In other words, what we can speak of in this context is not direct witnessing, but direct proximity, for instance through the family bonds such as the child-parent relationship.[14] Matrixial memory is also based on intimacy and transfer, yet on a different level. As Ettinger argues, in art there are certain inscribed traces of the experiences of *non-I*s and of the *trauma of the World*[15]; when engaging into the work of art, we may receive these fragments. Emphatically, matrixial memory that arises in this encounter is not ours and thus it cannot be remembered, yet, since it is distributed via art, it is impossible to be forgotten.[16] Therefore, sharing and participation that are provoked by the artwork do not require the direct, or literal, bond with the Other. In contrast to postmemory, one does not need to know somebody to receive, experience, and transmit his or her trauma. Again, Ettinger's art appears to work on the verge of these two notions, which will be demonstrated further on.

Series and Repetition

The similar period of creation and numbers ascribed to two *Eurydice* paintings – No. 14 and No. 15 – are not the only elements that the artworks

[14] See: M. Hirsch: "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today* 2008, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 106–107.

[15] The trauma of the World will be commented upon later in the article.

[16] See: B.L. Ettinger: "Transcryptum: Memory Tracing In/For/With the Other." In: *The Matrixial Borderspace…*, pp. 168–169; Eadem: "Wit(h)nessing Trauma and the Matrixial Gaze." In: *The Matrixial Borderspace…*, p. 145.

share.[17] In both cases, we are provided with a more or less the same photographic frame in the background – if we may call it this way – and we can see the contours of female bodies, hazy but visible despite the layers of paint. The two paintings also happen to oscillate around a similar colour scheme – canvas-like yellows are mixed with purples. Yet, *Eurydice*, No. 15 appears to give its spectator more details; since less paint is superimposed on the image, we are able to observe the women frozen within the painting's frame more closely and even distinguish one from another. In contrast, No. 14 is covered with a regular smear of purple paint, making the background more blurry and invisible. Thus, the overall impression may be more disturbing. After all, we can see something, but do we know exactly what we are dealing with? Moreover, these two paintings indeed interact, but how can we define this interaction?

When considering the question of series in Ettinger's artistic activity, Brian Massumi states that her paintings cannot be completed by principle; creating the sequence appears to be the applied solution to the need of "prolonging and expanding."[18] He believes that the images forming the particular series enter a network of interrelations. We read:

> The connections occur because each appearing-disappearing element [of the painting] carries the rhythm engrained in its canvas. […] The paintings call to one another, call each other forth, across the distance between the first floor and basement, across today and yesterday, light and darkness, visibility and invisibility, in a collective rhythm building from the rhythm of each.[19]

However, the paintings' multileveled structure of interactions, occasioned by the fragments that they share with one another, does not oppose in any way their individual potentiality to influence the viewer; nor do these pictures merge into one. Each of the artworks carries the possibility to act on its own, or, to put it differently, to invite the observer to join. Since a series is forever unfulfilled – that is, it has no final statement – it continuously augments the scope of communication, both internally and externally. As Massumi succinctly puts it, "painting is a crowd dynamic,"[20] intense in its serial multitude.

The question that may arise is: How is the multitude of *Eurydice* paintings related to the actual myth? Briefly speaking, the mythological situation is as follows: when Eurydice dies, Orpheus descends to Hell in order to rescue her;

[17] B.L. Ettinger: *Eurydice*, No. 15, 1994–1998, oil, xerography with photocopic dust, pigment, and ashes on paper mounted on canvas, 36.8x27 cm. In: *Art as Compassion…*, p. 86. © Courtesy of the artist. See: Figure 2. Eadem: *Eurydice*, No. 14, 1994–1996, oil, xerography with photocopic dust, pigment, and ashes on paper mounted on canvas, 25x52 cm. In: *Art as Compassion…*, p. 86. © Courtesy of the artist. See: Figure 3.

[18] B. Massumi: "Afterword…," p. 205.

[19] Ibidem.

[20] Ibidem, p. 206.

yet, if the woman is to be returned from the dead, Orpheus needs to fulfil one condition imposed by Hades – he cannot look back at her until they reach the exit. Thus, he cannot check if she follows him, or if it is her at all. At the very end he does not manage to restrain his uncertainty – or curiosity – and he looks. Orpheus sees Eurydice, but at this precise moment she disappears; thus, she is simultaneously present and absent. Judith Butler describes this paradoxical phenomenon as follows: "She is coming toward us, she is fading away from us, and both are true at once, and there is no resolution of the one movement into the other."[21] Therefore, even though Eurydice can be glimpsed – which already is an almost-impossible deed – she cannot be fully grasped. This myth casts more light on Ettinger's artistic activity – the photographs that serve as a background (or a founding layer) of the paintings do exist, yet they are partial and arrested in the act of disappearance. Furthermore, the application of the myth lays the ground for her theoretical pronouncements, such as the matrixial gaze, the suspension between presence and absence, and other reconsiderations of dichotomies. Summing up, Eurydice appears and disappears at the same time and so do the figures in Ettinger's paintings. Emphatically, these women on the verge of visibility shift the original sequence – this time it is us who follow them, not the other way round; we follow them beyond the borders of that which is visible.

What is, then, visible in *Eurydice*, No. 5?[22] There are several elements that deserve our attention. In the central part of the painting we may note the contours of women; the face of one of them is in half profile – it seems that she looks away, but in the viewer's direction. We cannot be sure of her facial expression; since the face is enlarged and blurred, we are provided with but an outline with no certain features. Still, via this composition of shades that – as we believe – constitute her face there emerges a sense of terror, as if she knew what was going to happen. Moreover, the painting teems with words in French and Hebrew; among them, we can grasp "vivante/morte" – these can be found in the upper part of the picture, above the women's heads. This phrase strikes us without coincidence or mercy, for because of its position within the frame it is easily distinguishable. It becomes a dreadful motto of the painting – and, actually, of the whole series – since the females are suspended between life and death, simultaneously present and lost. Finally, in the lower part we can see the layer of purple paint arrested in its action; it starts to cover the picture, thus commencing the process of disappearance.

The strokes of purple paint have not managed to reach the women yet, which is one of several acts of suspension we experience in *Eurydice*, No. 5. With reference to Ettinger, Christine Buci-Glucksmann writes that in art Eurydice is

[21] J. Butler: "Foreword: Bracha's Eurydice." In: *The Matrixial Borderspace…*, p. viii.

[22] B.L. Ettinger: *Eurydice*, No. 5, 1992–1994, oil, xerography with photocopic dust, pigment, and ashes on paper mounted on canvas, 47x27 cm. In: *Art as Compassion…*, p. 74. © Courtesy of the artist. See: Figure 4.

"a shade who exists between life and death, a figure of loss and love."[23] Indeed, in this painting time and all the processes related to it stop – the figures are frozen in their evanescence. Still, it does not mean that they are unable to act. It is not only the artwork that is suspended, but also the viewer, captivated in the central woman's expression. The viewer is called to enter the story of the woman: the narrative beyond his or her knowledge. Emphatically, the viewer's aim is not to witness the story as it is, since it is never fully graspable; rather, he or she is supposed to capture, change, and be changed by the imprints of it in order to pass them on "to others, present and archaic, cognized and uncognized appealing from the future, from the past or from an unrealized virtuality."[24] Thus, if we are arrested by the Eurydice figure, we join a sphere of transmission and reciprocity.

The shades of purples and yellows dominate the colour scheme of yet another picture – *Eurydice*, No. 23.[25] One can note a horizontal pattern of brushing within the frame; it does not, however, resemble the machinic "gesture of scanning"[26] yet. The spectator is able to recognise the outlines of females standing in a row, but their faces are not clear. Moreover, their bodies, coloured in light purple, are bleached and distorted, as if spectral. Even though the women seem to merge into the shadow, they are not indiscernible yet.[27] In *Eurydice*, No. 50, in contrast, we do not bear knowledge of who we follow.[28] In this pulsating, machine-like picture, the photograph – if there is one indeed – is fully covered by the layers of red paint, which has overthrown purples and yellows. The shadows that we stare at may resemble faces, yet in this phase we cannot be certain. As there is no easily accessible knowledge, we have no other choice but to trust the artist.

This exactly is the turning point – in the myth, Orpheus apparently did not have enough faith and thus he lost Eurydice by his decision to look back. Massumi comments upon this act as follows: "Orpheus looks. Eurydice appears to vision, too early. Too late! She fades away, midway to the surface, mid-appearing with Orpheus: *disappearance in co-emergence*."[29] Under his gaze, Eurydice shatters just before the possible return to the order of the living, but at the very same time her existence is affirmed. Similarly, Ettingerian *Eurydices* emerge and disappear simultaneously. The parts that form these paintings resurface through

[23] Ch. Buci-Glucksmann: "Eurydice's Becoming-world." In: *Art as Compassion…*, p. 69.

[24] B.L. Ettinger: "Copoiesis." *Ephemera* 2005, vol. 5, no. X, p. 710, http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/5-X/5-Xettinger.pdf (accessed 16.04.2013).

[25] B.L. Ettinger: *Eurydice*, No. 23, 1994–1998, oil, xerography with photocopic dust, pigment, and ashes on paper mounted on canvas, 25x47.5 cm. In: *Art as Compassion…*, pp. 90–91. © Courtesy of the artist. See: Figure 5.

[26] Ch. Buci-Glucksmann: "Eurydice's Becoming-world…," p. 75.

[27] Deleuze and Guattari's notion of *becoming-imperceptible* might provide us with an interesting interpretative path with regard to *Eurydice* paintings.

[28] B.L. Ettinger: *Eurydice*, No. 50, 2006–2007, oil on paper mounted on canvas, 25.3x31.1 cm. In: *Art as Compassion…*, p. 175. © Courtesy of the artist. See: Figure 6.

[29] B. Massumi: "Afterword…," p. 207. Emphasis mine.

the paint brushes, but they never reach a high level of visibility. Certain elements are hidden or diffuse while the others are emphasised – be it a face, a pose, chosen words, or a colour applied. All in all, there is nothing fixed or certain in these images. Yet, again, when considered from the matrixial angle, the encounter with art is by no means about (historical) knowledge; rather, experience, sensation, togetherness, or connectedness are the principal values here.

Looking at *Eurydice* paintings, we may find certain elements that provide us with a sense of incertitude – after all, we cannot always be sure what or who we observe – and unease – since the prospect of such a knowledge appears to be threatening in itself. It is especially the case of the works of art fully covered with paint, such as *Eurydice*, No. 50. Herein, the original photograph cannot be grasped, even though we may still believe that it does exist underneath. Sometimes, the fragments of it resurface – be it the eyes or the shapes of women – yet we lack the confidence whether what we look at in the pulsating image is really what it seems to be, or it is merely the result of our desire to see it. Nonetheless, all these vague elements slide at the margins of visibility, questioning the viewer's perception.

Ettinger argues that the work of art goes beyond the imaginary and the symbolic; namely, these orders are said to "carry the value of a Real."[30] Thus, if the real is inscribed in the artworks, they become potential openings into materiality beyond words: a traumatic experience. However, the question that arises is: what is the exact connection between trauma and the visual arts? Judith Butler clarifies that in Ettingerian psychoanalysis trauma is by no means visual, nor is it an encrypted phantom in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's understanding.[31] Instead, it

> works its way through the field of appearance without assuming precise form. […] [T]he trauma is not made visible, but the trauma works a disturbance within the visual field. There is a certain repetition of the trauma that takes place as this disturbance of the visual field, an alternation of disappearance and return, of inside and outside.[32]

[30] B.L. Ettinger: "Fragilization and Resistance." *Studies in the Maternal* 2009, vol. 1, no. 2, p. 3, http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/back_issues/issue_two/documents/Bracha1.pdf (accessed 16.04.2013).

[31] The notions of the crypt and the phantom that occupies it are explored in detail in: N. Abraham, M. Torok: *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*. Trans. N. Rand. Minneapolis 1986. For the differences between Ettinger's understanding of traumatic content and that of Abraham and Torok, see: B.L. Ettinger: "Transcryptum…," pp. 163–170 (for the Polish translation of "Transcryptum…," see: Eadem: "Transkryptum: tropienie śladów pamięci z/w/z myślą o Innym." Trans. A. Chromik, A. Kisiel. *Narracje o Zagładzie* 2016, no. 2, pp. 103–112). For a precise study of similarities and differences between the theories of Ettinger and Torok and Abraham, see: G. Pollock: "Introduction…," pp. 20–26.

[32] J. Butler: "Disturbance and Dispersal in the Visual Field." In: *Art as Compassion…*, p. 155.

Therefore, via art trauma disrupts the sphere of visuality, being located on its verge and interrupting it repetitively. It cannot be cognised or defined, but its precarious presence affects the observer. Emphatically, the experience transmitted is not only the personal trauma of the artist; it is also a more universal event that the artist wit(h)nesses,[33] namely – *the trauma of the World*. The artist, who by his or her act enables the matrixial encounter to occur, performs a highly remarkable function in Ettingerian universe. While "healing in fragilizing and wounding by healing,"[34] he or she creates the paths that connect the *I* with the several *non-I*s, facilitating the transfer of wavering traces of events, experiences, affects, and traumas, always already altered by his or her gesture,[35] but humanising nevertheless.

Since the paintings analysed above have been related more closely to the trauma of the World, we shall now proceed to the different category of a wound. In various series we can observe the recurring figure of the artist's mother. Among others, she appears in *Eurydice*, No. 37.[36] The image seems to have a grainy, cracked surface and is dominated by greys, yellows, and purples. What we can observe are two seemingly distinct realities that merge. On the left we can spot Ettinger's mother and father, easily distinguishable even though not photographically clear; their poses are statuesque, but their faces are blurred. This side of the painting has the light surroundings, as opposed to the right one, in which the disturbing female face, encountered previously in *Eurydice*, No. 5, emerges.[37] The surroundings emphasise and strengthen the contrasts between two sides of the artwork, where two places and temporalities are collated – pre-war Łódź and the Mizocz ghetto in 1942. Another discrepancy can be found in the fates of the people depicted, since Ettinger's parents are the survivors while the *Eurydice* figure is the victim. Still, there exists a certain relation between them – these people share the trauma of the Holocaust: the tragedy that allows for placing them together on one canvas.[38]

[33] Wit(h)nessing is a neologism proposed by Ettinger, connoting a sudden, uncontrollable feeling of closeness to the Other(s) – especially during an encounter with art – which results in the entrance to the matrixial stratum of togetherness. See: B.L. Ettinger: "Wit(h)nessing Trauma…," p. 150.

[34] B.L. Ettinger: "Fragilization and Resistance…," p. 23.

[35] See: ibidem.

[36] B.L. Ettinger: *Eurydice*, No. 37, 2001, oil, xerography with photocopic dust, pigment, and ashes on paper mounted on canvas, 28.3x21.4 cm. In: *Art as Compassion…*, p. 154. © Courtesy of the artist. See: Figure 7.

[37] Actually, this face seems to haunt the whole series, resurfacing in different parts of numerous *Eurydice* paintings.

[38] It is obviously not the only work of art that combines the photograph of Ettinger's parents with the Mizocz ghetto picture. See, for instance, two untitled sketches created between 1988 and 1989, where another fragment of the latter image is used. B.L. Ettinger: *No Title – Sketch*, 1988–1989, xerography with photocopic dust, pigment, and ashes on paper, 22.3x24.9 cm. In: *Art*

In the painting, two instances of a psychic wound are incorporated. One of them is the previously discussed trauma originating in the Other, wit(h)nessed and passed on by the artist. However, the picture of Ettinger's parents signifies yet another disruptive dimension. We can trace a personal story here – the burden of the Holocaust, seen from the perspective of the child of the survivors. This inherited, historical trauma was not transferred via language; as Griselda Pollock notes, the means of communication of Bluma and Uziel Lichtenberg was Polish – the language "*unknown to their children, locking the parents' past and its painful memories of loss into its foreign tongue, its indecipherable sounds that did not signify for their children who, nonetheless, were born into its acoustic envelope*."[39] Therefore, the experiences of parents, uncommunicable by means of the familiar language, would still affect the child. Importantly enough, what we see here is a clear example of postmemory,[40] which is worked-through via the artistic gesture, but also whose scope is extended to a more universal level because of that. Precisely, the imprints of traumatic experiences received by the second generation are possible to be accessed through the matrixial encounter with art, in which family bonds and direct closeness to someone's trauma do not matter to such an extent as fragility, openness, and desire to connect with the (unknown) *non-I*.

In a work of art from the *Mamalangue* series, ensemble V, No. 3, the viewer can witness yet another collage, but comprised of different elements.[41] Here, the aforementioned picture of the artist's parents is combined with a fragment taken from the photograph of Bracha L. Ettinger as a child, with her mother and brother.[42] In the analysed artwork, only Ettinger's face is located within the frame. The piece is grainy, mostly grey and black, with some brushes of red on the father's clothes. Interestingly enough, Ettinger's face is superimposed on her mother's; or is it the reverse?[43] These two females, peaceful and smiling, merge into each other, which certainly is not coincidental. We shall, however, leave this image for

as Compassion…, p. 207. Eadem: *No Title – Sketch*, 1988–1989, xerography with photocopic dust, crayon, pigment, and ashes on paper, 15.5x24.5 cm. In: *Art as Compassion…*, p. 207.

[39] G. Pollock: "A Matrixial Installation…," p. 197. Emphasis in the original.

[40] In *The Generation of Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch discusses Ettinger's art with reference to the notion of postmemory. Among others, she writes that Ettinger's series function as "drafts of a narrative in process, subject to re-vision," that is – "an open-ended narrative that embrace the need for return and repair, even as it accepts its implausibility." M. Hirsch: "Objects of Return." In: *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. New York 2012, p. 225. Yet, what interests me the most in this section is moving beyond the individual and familial experience and thus focusing on further transmission, which is why postmemory solely seems to be not enough.

[41] B.L. Ettinger: *Mamalangue – Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism*, ensemble V, No. 3, 1989–1990, Indian ink, xerography with photocopic dust, pigment, and ashes on paper, 22x21.7 cm. In: *Art as Compassion…*, p. 209. © Courtesy of the artist. See: Figure 8.

[42] See: G. Pollock, "A Matrixial Installation…," p. 199.

[43] Marianne Hirsch claims that "[t]he child's smile is covered, almost erased, by the mother's smiling figure." M. Hirsch: "Objects of Return…," p. 216.

a moment in order to look at another example incorporating the theme. *Matrix – Family Album*, No. 3 is the painting in which the mother's face from the picture with young Ettinger is revealed.[44] In the piece, the viewer encounters the familiar copier-like purple and red paint brushes; the work of art is half hidden under them. The part that remains depicts Bluma Lichtenberg. On the left, we can see Ettinger's face, starting to disappear, whereas her brother, whose position in the original photograph is on the right, has vanished almost completely from our sight. Another element that grasps our attention is the background consisting of words in Hebrew, resurfacing most intensely on the mother's face. All in all, the paintings analysed here are strongly interconnected; both seem to explore the issue of a complicated mother-daughter relationship.

The aforementioned works of art examine the familial connection. We may go so far as to claim that the emphasis is put on the two females, as the father is not a central figure in any of the pieces and, moreover, in the *Mamalangue* image it is the mother with whom the daughter blends.[45] The child-mother convoluted tie is manifested through the ceaseless recurrence of the latter in various artistic series. We may claim that we witness a *sui generis* aesthetic *fort/da* game here; the photograph of the mother is the reel, thrown away and pulled back time and again. The artist makes a metaphorical – but also manual, if we consider the artworking process – gesture of depart and return, or of making the image disappear and re-emerge, which is undoubtedly repetitive in a precarious manner. On the other hand, the very same act makes it possible for the artist to confront and handle this relationship, and even the possible future departure. Ultimately, since the personal element is included in the artwork, it is no longer individual or internal; rather, through the aesthetic practice, it is heightened to the level of the worldly.

Repetition is the issue that cannot be omitted when discussing Ettinger's series. After all, the paintings are comprised of photographs, endlessly returning in different forms. Such a recurrence is hazardous since, as Hirsch argues, the artist "allows all of these images to invade, inhabit, and haunt her."[46] Yet, there are several questions that seem to be more important; indeed, her gesture definitely provides us with something more than working-through. In this section, we have pondered on a plethora of issues arising as a consequence of encountering *Eurydices* and the paintings with the mother. All the images analysed are

[44] B.L. Ettinger: *Matrix – Family Album*, No. 3, 2003–2005, oil, xerography and photocopic dust, pigment, and ashes on paper mounted on canvas, 39.5x26 cm. In: *Art as Compassion…*, p. 219. © Courtesy of the artist. See: Figure 9.

[45] By no means do I wish to imply here that the father is an unimportant figure, or that he is excluded from the familial structure of relations. Still, in this article I put more emphasis on the mother in order to preserve the conciseness of the argument and in view of the fact that, as I have said, she is the more recurring trope in Ettinger's *oeuvre*.

[46] M. Hirsch: "Objects of Return…," p. 221.

engaged in a dis-appearance play – they suspend the binaries and shatter them simultaneously. As they are never complete, the artworks offer us no final word, but, instead, an invitation to participate, communicate, and interact. Such an interaction makes us follow them to the borders of the visible, that is, to the incorporated traumatic event; we are able to receive and share the knowledge about the trauma that does not belong to us. In Ettingerian apparatus, it is the artist who opens such a possibility – he or she wit(h)nesses the wound of the *non-I* and responds to it through the activity in the field of aesthetics. Emphatically, personal traumas of the artist are also included in art, which makes them accessible to the viewer in a mediated, changing, and subjective form; the condition is the viewer's responsiveness to this unspeakable, unhistorical, and distressing knowledge.

Ethics of the Artistic Gesture

Openness is inextricably linked to trust, as it has been suggested in the analyses of Eurydice (both the myth and the series); it also appears to be a curious psychoanalytical trope. It is, indeed, the foundation of any psychoanalytical practice, for without mutual reliance between the analyst and the analysant there is no question of the effective interaction. The very same notion is equally significant in the Ettingerian approach, where trust is related to the ability to make oneself fragile, to connect with the Other, and, as a consequence, to wit(h)ness trauma that belongs to someone else. Finally, the *Eurydice* series is the example of the artistic encounter in which trust becomes the essential feature – we, as viewers, place confidence in the artist, believing that the photograph is underneath the layers of paint; as a result, we follow the painting's path, open to the prospect of wit(h)nessing the trauma of the *non-I*. Therefore, trust makes it possible to encounter the Other and to be transformed – or even humanised – by this act.

The ethical aspect of the matrixial theory can be detected in several concepts connected with aesthetics. One of them is *transcryptum*, inspired by Torok and Abraham's notion of the crypt. Transcryptum is an artistic act or element that facilitates transmission of the imprints of trauma between the *I* and the *non-I*; in other words, it is a memory framework, occasioned by artworking, which facilitates sharing. Ettinger writes that "[i]n the artwork, traces of a buried-alive trauma of the world are reborn from amnesia into *co-emerging memory*."[47] Thus, an aesthetic gesture becomes an opportunity to symbolise the traumatic and to pass it on.

[47] B.L. Ettinger: "Wit(h)nessing Trauma…," p. 153. Emphasis mine.

The potentiality to communicate trauma is posed in contrast to Jacques Lacan's theorisation of the wound. As we remember, the real – known for its traumatic, uncognisable quality – is "essentially the missed encounter."[48] In such an understanding, trauma is impossible to be captured. Importantly enough, this observation applies to the individual, deeply personal wounding event. Hence, in Lacanian system, the very subject affected by trauma cannot grasp the origin of his or her own pain; if there is no possibility of accessing it, passing it on to the Other is out of the question. Ettinger's realm, in turn, is that of *almost*-impossibility. She elucidates: "Transcryptum creates the occasion for almost-impossible borderlinkage to otherwise inaccessible memory traces."[49] In the matrixial, art is a space of encounter that is unthinkable: the occurrence takes place even though it should not, thus contradicting the phallic point of view. Therefore, the artistic act produces a humanising space where the *I* and the *non-I* can meet and exchange fragments of their unspeakable knowledge.

In Ettingerian domain, traces of the traumatic event are possible to be not only retrieved but also shared; such a real experience appears to be extremely tangible – after all, we are "touching trauma," as the artist has inscribed in her notebook. It ought to be stressed that art provokes closeness while simultaneously being provoked by it. In order to enter this intimate sphere of sharing and proximity, one needs to sacrifice one's borders, face them, and then move them in order to allow the Other to encounter one in such a state of fragility and openness beyond rejection. If one is not willing to abandon one's boundaries temporarily and to accept this burden, getting closer to the *non-I* becomes an impossible task, since this tangible happening requires going beyond the phallic realm. Therefore, there is a *sui generis* circle of proximity – once one approaches the Other openly, intimacy deepens and goes further. Pollock summarises it succinctly:

> If I am "moved" or touched or changed by an encounter with/through an artwork, I am being changed within myself by an unknown event that is not mine. I let it happen. I want this change. I am not merely a witness to the existence of this artwork as the object created by an other. When it has an effect, I participate in wit(h)nessing, as I were, when I allow myself to be transformed through […] pleasure or pain by this otherness that I cannot know fully, yet which I internalize and process.[50]

What does it mean for us from the ethical angle? Wit(h)nessing evoked through the involvement in art provides us with the painful perspective of the *non-I*. This

[48] J. Lacan: "Tuché and Automaton." In: Idem: *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. J.-A. Miller. Trans. A. Sheridan. New York–London 1981, p. 55.

[49] B.L. Ettinger: "Transcryptum…," p. 170.

[50] G. Pollock: "Introduction…," p. 15.

non-passive act of closeness has an ethical potentiality, for the change induced by this encounter makes us human, or even humane.

Since one may grasp the fragments of the Other's experience, which is disruptive, dreadful, and impossible to be symbolised, such transfer also becomes profoundly hazardous and disturbing for the very recipient, but not necessarily in a negative sense. Ettinger argues that the process of transmitting trauma is based on "hurting while healing."[51] It hurts because it challenges one's stability: the subject becomes a wit(h)ness and, since wit(h)nessing is active, pain begins to touch him or her. This is an indispensable threat of the matrixial realm, along with which there comes the promise of healing. Judith Butler goes as far as to claim that sharing the traces of the pain of the Other may be perceived as the subject's duty, which is especially applicable if we consider the historical traumas such as the Holocaust. Precisely, one who has suffered the disruptive experience needs to obliterate it in order to be able to move on; due to that, the subject that wit(h)nesses this distressing imprint should "[remember] for the other,"[52] or rather – instead of him or her. The outcome of it is the "testimony that takes place through the transmission of the trace, a safeguarding of the other against a knowledge"[53] that would annihilate the trauma-affected *non-I*. Sharing then becomes a responsible task of great value, even though it also appears to be a burden.

As it has been shown, the artistic gesture opens the passage to the sphere in which the ethical relationship with the Other may occur. This connectedness is based on reciprocity – the traces that we acquire ought to be further shared with several Others with-in the matrixial sphere, which means that a passive reception is not enough. Ettinger argues that in this intimate stratum of fragility we face the "impossibility of not-sharing."[54] Such a statement may seem perplexing in the light of the classical psychoanalytical approaches; however, what is at stake is that when we are open for the encounter the work of art offers, we cannot remain distant or unsympathetic, just as the artist finds it impossible to be unresponsive to the trauma of the World. As a result, the viewer is believed to participate in a humanising act of touching trauma, being touched by it, and simultaneously redistributing this tangible event to the other partners. This procedure can be accurately summarised as Ettingerian *communicaring*, which Catherine de Zegher defines as "caring within sharing."[55] In the sphere where transmissibility is inextricably linked to compassion, care, and trust, the artist's aesthetic act receives an ethical dimension.

[51] B.L. Ettinger: "Trans-subjective Transferential Borderspace." In: B. Massumi (ed.): *A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*. London–New York 2002, p. 236.

[52] J. Butler: "Disturbance and Dispersal in the Visual Field…," p. 153.

[53] Ibidem, p. 155.

[54] B.L. Ettinger: "Weaving a Woman Artist with-in the Matrixial Encounter-event." In: *The Matrixial Borderspace…*, p. 182.

[55] C. de Zegher: "Drawing out Voice and Webwork," in: *Art as Compassion…*, p. 135.

Communicaring with the *Non-I*

This article has been revolving around the examination of Ettinger's aesthetic gesture with regard to the questions of trauma(s) and the possible humanising prospects. I have taken into consideration the selected works of art and collated them with an Ettingerian theoretical frame in order to demonstrate that it indeed is within the scope of the artistic activity to move the viewer closer to the traumatising event of the unknown Other. As it has been revealed in the analysis of the chosen *Eurydices* and the paintings with the mother, the artist-psychoanalyst's multileveled gesture, in which several traumas are assembled, opens us to the *non-I*, suspends the seemingly secure binaries, and reasserts the significance of proximity, empathy, and responsiveness. It is evident, therefore, that grand ethical, clinical, and theoretical implications may resurface through aesthetics. The matrixial subjectivising domain, accessed due to the intimate artistic experience, is indeed "a circle of the touched and the touching"[56] – the tactile sphere in which threat and trust are precariously interwoven.

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[56] M. Merleau-Ponty: *The Visible and the Invisible*. Ed. C. Lefort. Trans. A. Lingis. Evanston 1968, p. 143.

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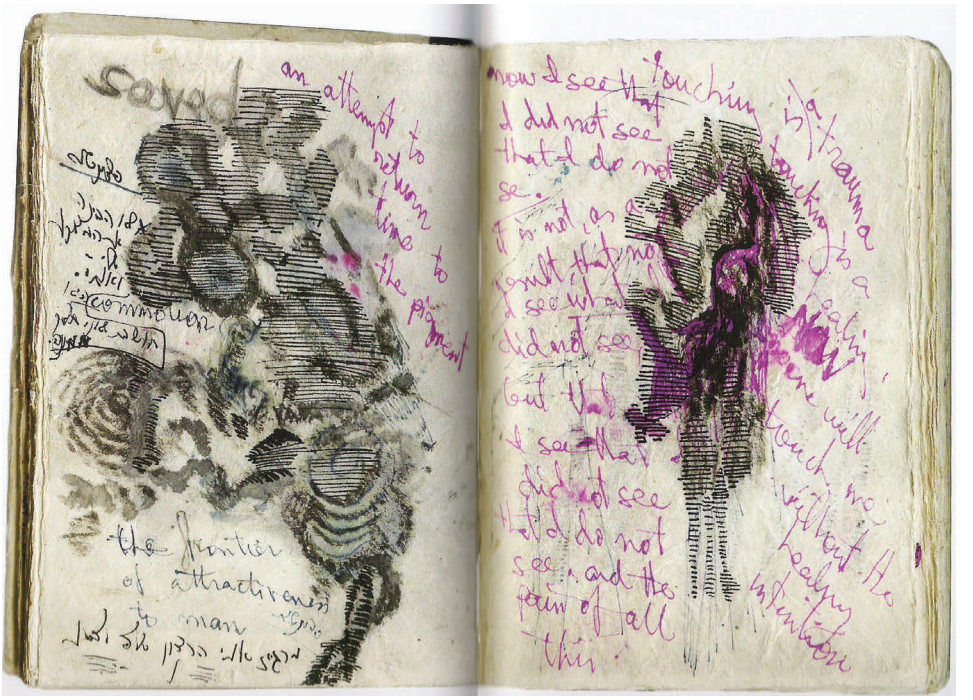

Figure 1.

B.L. Ettinger: *Notebook*, 2006, water, Indian ink, fountain pen, pencil, double-page spread from 15.3x11.2 cm notebook. In: C. de Zegher, G. Pollock (eds.): *Art as Compassion: Bracha L. Ettinger*. Brussels 2012, pp. 104-105. © Courtesy of the artist

Figure 2.

B.L. Ettinger: *Eurydice*, No. 15, 1994–1998, oil, xerography with photocopic dust, pigment, and ashes on paper mounted on canvas, 36.8x27 cm. In: *Art as Compassion…*, p. 86. © Courtesy of the artist

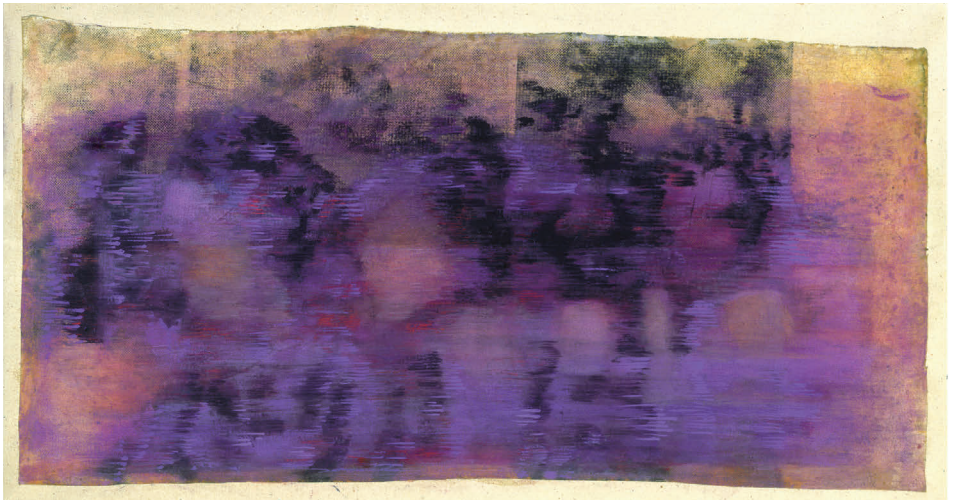

Figure 3.

B.L. Ettinger: *Eurydice*, No. 14, 1994–1996, oil, xerography with photocopic dust, pigment, and ashes on paper mounted on canvas, 25x52 cm. In: *Art as Compassion…*, p. 86. © Courtesy of the artist

Figure 4.

B.L. Ettinger: *Eurydice*, No. 5, 1992–1994, oil, xerography with photocopic dust, pigment, and ashes on paper mounted on canvas, 47x27 cm. In: *Art as Compassion…*, p. 74. © Courtesy of the artist

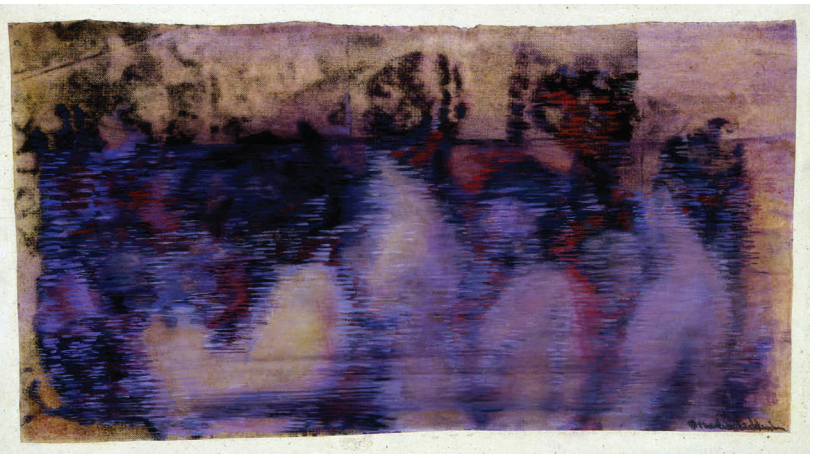

Figure 5.

B.L. Ettinger: *Eurydice*, No. 23, 1994–1998, oil, xerography with photocopic dust, pigment, and ashes on paper mounted on canvas, 25x47.5 cm. In: *Art as Compassion*…, pp. 90–91. © Courtesy of the artist

Figure 6.

B.L. Ettinger: *Eurydice*, No. 50, 2006–2007, oil on paper mounted on canvas, 25.3x31.1 cm. In: *Art as Compassion*…, p. 175. © Courtesy of the artist

Figure 7.
B.L. Ettinger: *Eurydice*, No. 37, 2001, oil, xerography with photocopic dust, pigment, and ashes on paper mounted on canvas, 28.3x21.4 cm. In: *Art as Compassion…*, p. 154. © Courtesy of the artist

Figure 8.

B.L. Ettinger: *Mamalangue – Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism*, ensemble V, No. 3, 1989–1990, Indian ink, xerography with photocopic dust, pigment, and ashes on paper, 22x21.7 cm. In: *Art as Compassion…*, p. 209. © Courtesy of the artist

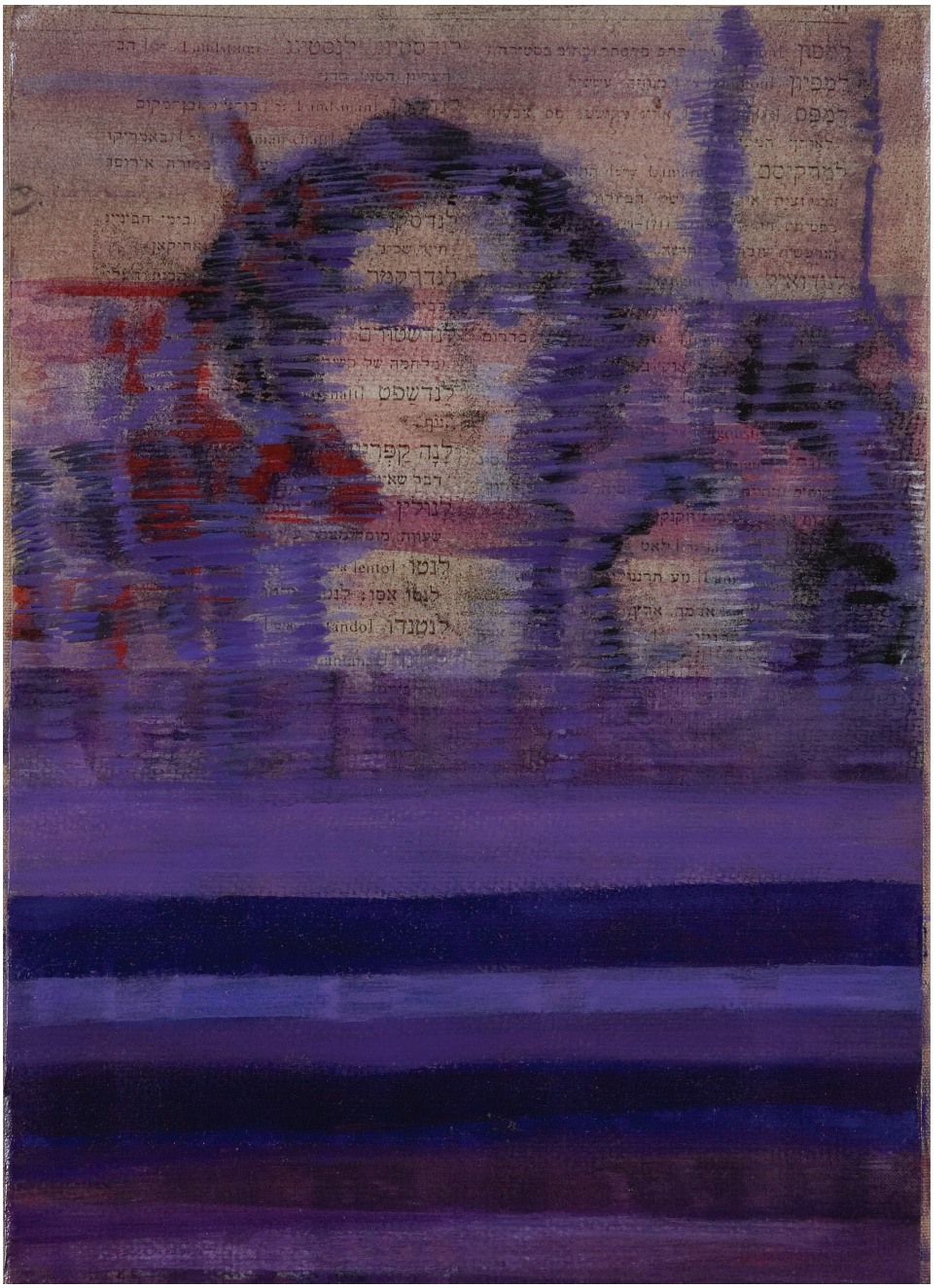

Figure 9.
B.L. Ettinger: *Matrix – Family Album*, No. 3, 2003–2005, oil, xerography and photocopic dust, pigment, and ashes on paper mounted on canvas, 39.5x26 cm. In: *Art as Compassion…*, p. 219.

Anna Kisiel

Dotykalna trauma: o geście artystycznym Brachy L. Ettinger

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest twórczości Brachy L. Ettinger – izraelskiej artystki, autorki teorii macierzy, psychoanalityczki, feministki oraz córki Żydów ocalonych z Holokaustu – zarówno w jej aspekcie teoretycznym, jak i artystycznym. Autorka stara się dowieść, że artystyczny gest Ettinger jest zarazem ucieleśnieniem niemal bezgranicznej bliskości względem traumatycznych wydarzeń oraz chwytem wywołującym w widzach zawieszenie rozróżnienia na to, co teraz, i to, co już minione, oraz na to, co obecne, i na to, co już nie. Uściślając, gest staje się zabiegiem zdolnym ukierunkować widza na traumatyczne doświadczenie Innego. Jak Ettinger sama przyznaje, w jej pracy teoria i sztuka są ze sobą niezwykle mocno związane; niniejszy artykuł stara się podążać podobną drogą i podejmuje próbę pokazania, jak te dwie instancje wzajemnie na siebie wpływają w twórczych transformacjach. Autorka artykułu rozpoczyna od omówienia techniki artystycznej stosowanej przez Ettinger, jej ujęcia traum(y) oraz pamięci w perspektywie teorii macierzy. Następnie, podejmuje się interpretacji wybranych obrazów z najsławniejszej serii Ettinger – *Eurydice*, opartych na fotografii prowadzonych na stracenie nagich kobiet z getta w Mizoczu, wykonanej w 1942 roku, a także dzieł przywołujących figurę matki. Obrazy te są odczytywane poprzez pryzmat takich pojęć, jak między innymi trauma świata oraz *fort/da*. Ponadto, artykuł sugeruje, w jaki sposób etyczny potencjał wybranych pojęć Ettinger znajduje zastosowanie w jej praktyce artystycznej.

Słowa klucze: Bracha L. Ettinger, teoria macierzy, sztuka, trauma, gest, Mizocz, Inny