

Creativity as the Opposite
of Death and Destruction
A Conversation with Elise Bittenbinder
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Someone who suffers from post-traumatic stress syndrome often forgets not only the experience, but also the accompanying emotions. The traumatized person is left an empty hull. Is my description correct?

"Post-traumatic stress syndrome" is a clinical term. The process described in the question is only part of the definition. The word "trauma" originally comes from the Greek and means "wound". The term was not applied in psychology until the end of the 19th century.

A trauma is an event that exceeds the psyche's capacity to adequately respond. PTS syndrome is an illness that arises when the event is not processed. It then results in certain symptoms. One of these symptoms can be that when the traumatized person remembers the traumatic experience, she/he can no longer associate the emotions that arise with the event. That she/he is as if dead, fending off emotions, and then ending up in a rigid stance dissociated from events or people.

Is a trauma the beginning of a spiral of "wrong" behavior patterns?

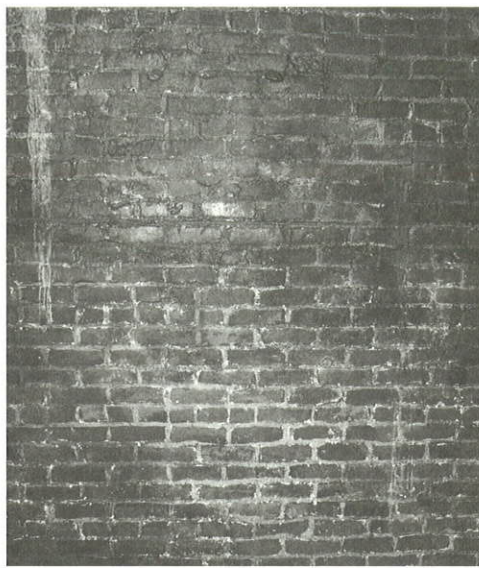
A typical phenomenon with traumatized people is that the trauma is re-experienced again and again, that the emotions or internal pictures connected with the experience constantly repeat themselves and cannot be shut off. In addition, there is also a re-experiencing in "flashbacks", in which the patient suddenly thinks she/he is back in the traumatic moment and reacts similarly to how she/he would react in the real situation, though it is no longer the same situation.

Typical ways people—and not just trauma patients—work through things is to repeat them again and again until at some point a "solution" arises. To escape the same situation in a different way. I wouldn't say that a trauma is necessarily the beginning of a wrong behavior pattern. Most people do find coping mechanisms or ways to integrate the experience into their lives. Very often they use their creative imagination as a helpful tool.

Can a trauma have consequences for a person's sex life?

Yes, absolutely. Especially when the traumatic experience is of a sexual nature or when women experience sexualized violence. Torture, for example, often has a sexual character. Sexuality and pleasure are an enormous life power, an expression of the joy of life that the torturer wants to break.

The traumatized person later often has difficulties trusting a person again. Sexuality also means letting oneself go. And one can let oneself go only if one has strong trust in oneself and a world around them that is basically supportive.



The Invisible Hero / 2005 / Production shot

For my video work *The Invisible Hero*, I had "visualizations" spoken onto the sound track. The standardized texts I used enable traumatized people to travel into their own (damaged) inner life and are intended to be repeatedly heard. What do you think about this kind of therapy?

If a visualization is carried out with the accompaniment of a good therapist, this can indeed have a healing effect. Of course, there are different schools with different methods. One has to decide case by case which method is the best. I myself use hypnosis a lot, in order to guide a patient back to a certain experience and to overcome it.

I don't use standardized texts or cassettes. I personally find it boring and mostly not useful to make the same journey again and again. I work with extremely traumatized people and would not use standardized texts with them, because I always have to pay attention to how a patient responds and how far I can go and make sure that nothing is triggering an anxiety and could have a re-traumatizing effect.

The internal journey taken during visualizations resembles the shamans' journeys into the unconscious. Do you think that visualizations take up anew an ancient form of self-healing?

Definitely. I believe that this is a primal human ability. Since I have a lot to do with people from other cultures, I am also interested in their methods of healing and rituals. There are a great many connections that we have hardly discovered. Hypnosis, or "healing sleep", for instance, was already known to the Greeks.

There are also so-called affirmative therapeutic texts that the patient must speak repeatedly over a longer period of time. I had the thought that these texts function like a kind of brainwashing. Do you see this similarly?

These texts correspond to certain methods that are often employed in therapy. But I think that they have to be worked out by a therapist in targeted, individual form and that they must really mean something to the person. Otherwise they are "empty" texts.

In your trauma treatment, you work a lot with art therapy. Typical of this form of therapy is that the patients are given no directives. This seems to be the exact opposite of what the aforementioned visualizations do. Am I right? What method do you consider more effective?

One of the means of processing traumatic experiences—here I am speaking of torture or severe human rights violations, i.e., manmade disasters—was always to deal with them artistically. Especially when one person is tortured by another, the victim experiences a feeling of total helplessness. Life and death depend on the other; the victim is deeply shattered in his power to do anything.

Creativity means doing something on one's own and is thus the opposite of death, destruction, and situations that stymie one. If one can produce something using one's own resources, one is creative and can find a way out of one's own problems.

For this reason, I think that the creative, artistic method in which the patient himself "creates" is more healing than the method of taking predetermined inner journeys.

Art therapy uses art as a form of expression. In your opinion, where does the difference between therapy and art lie?

For me this is a difficult question; good psychotherapy is an art. Art can be therapeutic for certain people. A psychotherapy is a desired ritual of change. The goal is that the patient, together with a therapist, opens himself up to follow a certain method, to take a certain path to achieve a change in his life or to change the way he deals with problems. Now if you tell me what art is, maybe we can work out the difference.

Elise Biltzenbinder is a psychotherapist and works with victims of torture and human rights violations and politically persecuted refugees (at XENION, Berlin). She is president of The German Association of Psychosocial Centres of Refugees and Torture Victims (Bundesweite Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Psychosozialen Zentren für Flüchtlinge und Folteropfer, BAFF).

This interview is a continuation of a conversation held at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein on the occasion of the presentation of the video *The Invisible Hero*, 2005, a co-production with the Video-Forum at NBK.

Maggie, what is ritual prostitution?

Ritual prostitution is a historical reality which existed in many cultures for thousands of years. There is a lot of evidence that ritual prostitution was practiced in different cultures around the world. In the temple, sexuality was considered to be sacred. There were priestesses in the temple, women who had devoted their lives to serving the goddess of that particular temple. Men would come in, pay their money, and go in to meet the holy whores.

How does your work relate to that?

I was a modern-day Sacred Prostitute myself for a number of years in a men's workshop. This was how I learned about this role. When I first heard the expression "Sacred Prostitute", I instantly felt that the two most essential aspects of myself—my sexuality and my spirituality—could finally be united in this archetypal role.

Why did you stop doing the work of the Sacred Prostitute?

At a certain moment I began to realize that I didn't want to work with men anymore. Society, the world, has focused on men and their problems for thousands of years. I grew weary of trying to support the confused and troubled men of this generation. I wanted to meet strong men, men in their power. I wanted to create situations for women that would be healing for them and their sexuality. So I turned the Temple around, gave the role of Sacred Prostitute to men, and felt this to be something more appropriate for today. This is what we need today, to focus on the healing of women's sexuality.

Why does women's sexuality need to be healed?

Spirit is neither female nor male, but we come from a culture, which, for thousands of years, has mostly pictured Spirit or God as being masculine. He was a big old granddaddy with a long gray beard, sitting on a cloud and he was all about punishment, separation, and determining what was good and what was bad, or sinful. Growing up in a Christian culture, most of us have inherited the church's separation of spirituality from sexuality. We have been taught to believe that prayer and regular attendance at church makes us spiritual but what we do in bed does not. That is why the Sacred Prostitute is such a powerful archetypal image for us today. Because she/he pulls together the two aspects that Christianity, and actually all patriarchal religions, have tried to take apart—the sacred and the sexual.

Sexuality officially had a practical application. You make love to make babies. Female pleasure had no place within the monotheist fundamentalist religions. As we continue to see even today in Africa and parts of Asia, millions of women continue to have their genitals, this organ of pleasure, systematically butchered. Female pleasure is viewed as a threat to the unquestioned authority of the man and the society that he has created. If a woman is sexually free, if she can enjoy the pleasure of her own body, she may become headstrong and she will be difficult to control. If she has no clitoris and therefore no pleasure while having sex, she will be docile and obedient, and will not wander off after some romantic notion. Here in our "civilized" culture in the West, women are not physically mutilated "down there" but they are very often emotionally cut off. We do not need to use a sharp stone or a knife, the work is done on a much more subtle level that involves shame and guilt. So what my work really brings to women is freedom from this religiously generated concept of separation of the sacred and the sexual. For most women, this is the beginning of true freedom.

Can female sexuality be connected to Goddess worship?

A woman's sexuality is in fact the expression of her connection with the Goddess force, her connection with all that is sacred in the universe. It is her holiness, her creational power. The energy she holds in her uterus, in her vagina, is truly her life force, her essence. From this creative place, she gives life but she also experiences orgasms that radiate out to the farthest corners of the universe. Imagine how that can heal the planet!



Goddess Isis on a pig, terra cotta. Originally Egyptian, in the Hellenistic age there were temples in her name throughout Europe, Africa, and Asia.

So men are the Sacred Prostitutes in your Temple?

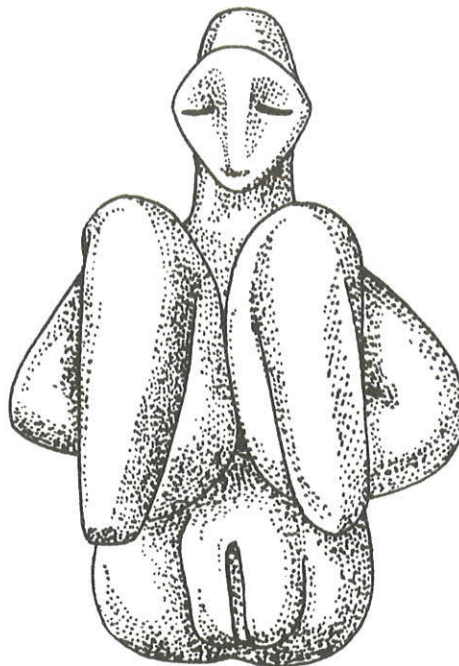
Yes, I work with a very carefully selected men's team. Men who are in touch with their own sexuality, their own phallic power, and know how to connect their heart with their cock. Each of these men has also successfully integrated his female side. And I use these men in service to the healing of women in a ritual situation. The women's contact with these men is absolutely impersonal. There is no conversation or getting acquainted on a personal level. These men are not available for partnership with the women; there is no exchanging phone numbers or making dates to meet again next week. These men are not our soul mates or the fathers of our children. They represent a masculine archetypal picture for the women to experience. They are fully present with the strength of their masculinity and women have the opportunity to discover themselves, who they are as sexual beings, by opening to this masculine force. This is what is known as the Hieros Gamos, the Sacred Marriage, where the masculine and the feminine become united on every level.

How is such a ritual structured?

It's fabulous and very beautiful. The ritual is conducted in total silence and all participants, male and female wear masks. I prepare the participating women for two days before they are invited into the Temple. The women enter the Temple and they see the masked men for the first time and can decide to which archetype they feel drawn. When they are ready, they can approach the High Priestess and ask for what they desire, what they want to experience, with the man of their choice. It can be as simple as longing to lie in the arms of the archetypal Priest. It can be as exciting as having sexual intercourse with the archetypal Warrior. It is for the women to decide what they want and to articulate it to the High Priestess. It can be very healing for women to understand their own desire and to be able to go for it without shame, judgment or regret.

Are men and women naked in the ritual?

The men are clothed in a way that illustrates more clearly the archetype that they represent. For example, the archetypal figure of "Pan" really looks like a being that lives in the woods. His "bed" is covered in twigs and dry leaves so that it looks and feels like a real forest floor. The "Priest" wears an authentic religious vestment and sometimes carries a Bible and rosary beads. The "Master" is robed as a Japanese warrior and carries the ropes of a Japanese bondage master (and he uses the ropes too!). Women come dressed in their most erotic



Figurine in a birth-giving posture. Early Sesklo, Achaïlleion II, Thessaly, Greece, 6300–6200 BC

underwear. For many women, going into the Temple gives them the motivation to go out and purchase some really hot, gorgeous, silky things to wear. White cotton panties don't feel sexy on anybody, so let's leave 'em at home. Being naked sometimes can feel sexy but in a large group like this, it feels like a nudist beach party and that is not the mood that we are creating in the Temple. Clothes do get discarded at certain moments during the ritual but generally speaking lace and leather are the dress code for the Temple.

Is Goddess worship part of the Temple Rituals?

Goddess worship is of course connected to the Temple, in the sense that a Goddess focus puts the feminine very much at the center of all life. Sometimes I actually have a woman in my team who will physically represent the Goddess as an archetype. She has to be a very delicious, very beautiful, round juicy woman, and it is a wonderful experience to go to her, lie in her arms, touch her and have her touch you. It can be very healing. Goddess worship is more of an inner orientation, when a woman realizes: The Goddess lives in me! I bring that sacredness with me into the Temple and the sacredness is part of me when I leave. I and the Goddess are One. There is no separation.

Is your work a political statement?

Well, I feel the work that I do is intensely empowering for women, because it takes them very much out of what has held women under control for thousands of years. A masculine dominated culture is part of women's history and I believe that there is no value in assigning blame to the victims or the victimizers. More interesting is where are we now, and where are we going to go, now that the energy of the feminine is being reintegrated into the cultures of this Earth. So in this sense, perhaps my work is political but it is more of a movement than a statement. Making a political statement might be a masculine approach. Connecting the heart and the pussy, which is what I do, feels a lot more like the movement of the divine feminine.

Maggie Tapert is the initiator of a training program called Wings of Joy®. She organizes and teaches workshops on the subject of female sexuality. For the last 15 years, she has led a ritual called The Temple. As High Priestess, Maggie Tapert led the Full Moon Ritual in the video Moon Rituals.

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