



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Ground zero. The transitional space of contemporary art
Vekony, D.

Citation

Vekony, D. (2017, April 11). *Ground zero. The transitional space of contemporary art*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/47798>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/47798>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/47798> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Vékony, D.

Title: Ground zero. The transitional space of contemporary art

Issue Date: 2017-04-11

Chapter 5 - Transitional space, transformational object

The previous chapter discussed the concept of rupture as present in and particular to some contemporary art practices. It was argued that this force occurring in some artworks might open up the potential for ground zero experience to emerge. This final chapter aims to grasp the nature and the further potentials of this space of absence that I have titled as the 'transitional space of contemporary art'. The transitional space of contemporary art, as I see it, might take the viewer to an opening up of space for reconsidering how one is in the world. It is opened by rupture, defined by absence and can be seen as a transformative state.

5.1 Outline

Given that many psychoanalysts understand the art experience as a transformational event, psychoanalytic theories on the art experience are elaborated upon. These practitioners see the root of the potentials of art appreciation in early childhood development. Donald W Winnicott, the British psychoanalyst, argues that the art experience is the continuation of the early childhood stage that he calls the 'transitional or potential space' of the infant. Follower Christopher Bollas adopts the concept of the 'transformational phase' and argues that the art experience is the reenactment of the relationship one would have with the constantly motivating mother. For Bollas, this is a state defined by the phenomenon of the 'unthought known', an existential state before (or beyond) representation. Their ideas as possible ways to grasp the art experience will be discussed in this chapter.

The reason why their ideas are important for this research is that they see art as the adult version of childhood transformation and therefore argue that art has the potential for changing our attitude towards life as we are living it today. Although it might seem that Winnicott and Bollas are saying the same thing, they are actually not. The distinction between their approach and its relevance when grasping what contemporary art can possibly do, are considered throughout the chapter. Both Winnicott and Bollas acknowledge

that not only art can function as an adult type of transitional/transformational space, but other practices such as psychotherapy can do a similar job. I present these practices in order to contrast them with the art experience.

Although various practices might induce transitional space, it is my contention that the particular nature of the transitional space of art lies in the fact that, unlike other practices, art operates with images. Because of their power, as articulated in Chapter Two, images can open up a space beyond representation, a space that can become the 'site of life'. This ability of art to reach beyond representation and function as a unique site of transitional space is juxtaposed by psychoanalyst James Hillman's take on the role of images. Within the category of images in general, I discuss how art in particular can function as a transitional object.

Further on, by narrowing down the phenomenon of art to contemporary art, I argue that contemporary art, especially those artistic practices that might lead to 'ground zero', produces/leads to an unusual kind of transitional space. These practices act so differently that their operation could better be grasped, not as Winnicott-ian transitional, but as Bollas-ian transformational objects. Through examples I explore where precisely their potential as transformational objects might lie.

5.2 The transitional space of the child

The subsequent paragraphs introduce psychoanalytic theory on the transitional space of the child. This idea is important, as these professionals consider that the root of the art experience lies in childhood personality development. As the British psychoanalyst and paediatrician, DW Winnicott, argues, culture, including the arts, is the continuation of the transitional space of the child. He writes: "In order to study the play and then the cultural life of the individual one must study the fate of the potential space between any one baby and the ... motherfigure..." (1971:135).

Winnicott claims that in order to understand the artistic experience one needs to reach back to a phase of the mother-child relationship that he calls the 'transitional or potential space' of the child. In his book, *Playing and reality* (1971), he claims that the artistic experience of the adult can be seen as the continuation of the transitional space of early

childhood development. What is this space exactly? How can we find a way to the art experience?

Winnicott uses the term 'transitional space' in order to point to a phase of personality development that is an intermittent, in-between state of the infant who is united with the mother, but is willing to/forced to separate.¹ For Winnicott, transitional space – as an articulated phenomenon - takes place when the infant slowly recognizes that it is independent from the mother (roughly between 4-12 months) but s/he is still defined by the mother. It is a phase of separation that has not quite happened yet; the infant sees itself in relation to the mother, but already senses that s/he is independent from her. As Winnicott argues, transitional space and transitional phenomena are an "... intermediate area ... along with the use made of objects that are not part of the infant's body yet are not fully recognized as belonging to external reality" (1971:3).

In other words, Winnicott sees the transitional space as a state of in-between in which there is and there is not an independent, outside reality, clearly distinguished from the child. Prior to the transitional state, Winnicott believes that the infant initially exists in a "primary merged state" of unity with the mother ("no mother no child") (1971:152). The infant cannot see itself as a separate entity from the mother and experiences the mother as if she were under its magical control. At this point, the mother is a pure presence, while the infant is in an unintegrated state of pure being. The child exists in the being of the mother. However, the child suffocates from the mother's presence, a fullness which is too much to bear. What needs to be present is an absence of the mother's presence, put simply, the mother needs to be there as a shadow in the background. In order for the infant to realize his/her own personhood, Winnicott states that there needs to be a separation from the illusion of 'no child/no mother'. This separation comes about through the creation of an intermediate area between mother and child, between the other and the self. Inside the transitional space, the infant experiences the following: "... the baby has maximally intense experiences in the potential space between the subjective object and the object objectively perceived, between me-extensions and the not-me. This potential space is at the interplay

¹ Although initially the concept was a psychoanalytic terminology, different theoretical branches have adopted it and it has been applied widely to areas of culture such as architecture and anthropology. Before I explore how this term is used in different theoretical fields, I outline the Winnicott-ian use of the concept.

between there being nothing but me and there being objects and phenomena outside omnipotent control” (1971:135).

Formulated differently, the transitional space is the state in which the child experiences both realities: the self as an independent subject and the self as merged together with its surrounding. It is through the negotiation of the absence of the mother (the other: “object not me”) that a potential space opens up. This potential space allows the infant to explore, test and play with a new experience of self.

In this (potential) transitional space the infant finds the not-me object, acknowledges that it represents the ‘other’, and weaves this object into his/her personal pattern. The object found, the thumb or the teddy bear, becomes a transitional object with a variety of attributes. The nature of the object is secondary, it can be a dummy, a teddy, a cloth etc., but nonetheless the object itself has immense importance for the child (Winnicott 1971).

The transitional space itself is a “neutral area” in which the infant with his/her transitional object coexist. In this space the question “*Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?*” does not need to be answered” (Winnicott 1971:9). The infant lives in this ever present reality with the transitional object that is loved, hated, used, abused and cared for. It is nothing but everything at the same time, it is also omnipotent, supernatural, but can be bullied and brutalized if necessary (fig. 28.). The transitional space is an immensely creative realm in which the boundaries of self and other, infant and mother, unconscious and conscious, fantasy and reality are fixed, and completely flexible at the same time.



Fig. 28. transitional object brutalized or destroyed

Although in a healthy personality development the transitional object loses its importance, and omnipotence is suddenly forgotten, Winnicott (1971:2) claims that the transitional realm does not disappear with the growth and maturity of the child. Furthermore, he adds that the same way we keep our conscious as well as unconscious self, we keep this third area within us that in adult life is going to be the place of practices such as art and religion. How does art operate as transitional space/object? Before I explain the connection between this space and the art experience, let me briefly present the ideas of another psychoanalyst, close to Winnicott, who also sees the root of the art experience in early childhood development. The theory is similar, yet the root of the art experience is detected at an earlier stage of personality development.

5.3 The transformational space of the child

British psychoanalyst, Christopher Bollas, is deeply engaged with the idea of the transitional. In his seminal work: *The shadow of the object: psychoanalysis of the unthought known* (1987) Bollas, a Winnicott-ian himself, introduces the concept of 'transformational object' when exploring personality development. He argues (1987:286):

I ... used this term – transformational object – to define the infant's experience of the first object. ... the infant experiences the mother as a process of alteration. She attends to him in a way that changes his external and inner worlds. Infants ... internalize the maternal process which is laden with logical paradigms that contribute to the laws of the child's character. As mother and child are engaged in countless transactions, these become facts of life that contribute to the logic of each person's existence.

Bollas sees the transformational object of the child – an object of most importance as it defines us for life - as none else but the mother (1987:13-30). Bollas sees the interaction of the infant and the mother as characterized by transformation. It is the mother, the first (discrete) object that fires this engine of search that first alters the infant's being in the world, as it is an object that demands, motivates, inspires and changes. The mother talks to

the infant, feeds it, turns it, carries it around, she is a constant stimulation and expectation of how the infant is supposed to be in the world. The mother, although she is called an object, is actually a process, an experience, identified with a constant alteration of self-experience (1987:13-30).

What then, to Bollas, is the transitional object? Bollas, too, argues that the 'transitional object' as outlined by Winnicott is a subsequent phase in personality development in which the mother-environment is displaced onto 'external' subjective-objects. The transitional object is the compensation of the trauma of the loss of the mother and it becomes the infant's first creative act outside the mother-environment. This is why the transitional object can be such a site of comfort (1987:15). However, Bollas sees the transitional object as a consequence of a prior process, namely transformation 'demanded' by a constantly motivating mother.

The transformational phase is of crucial importance to Bollas as it is in this state that he sees our basic unconscious motivations for how we conduct our lives. It is in this state that our 'package for life' manifests. He calls this phenomenon the 'unthought known'. The unthought-known is somatic knowledge that is there prior to thought manifest, and emerges in the transformational phase. How should we imagine this state? Bollas likens it to "modern dance where the dancer expresses the unthought-known through body knowledge" (1987:282). This is a state beyond the rational, even beyond the representational; a state of existential experience. It is shaped in the transformational phase by the reactions of the infant to the mother's actions. Infant and mother are in an operational and not representational relationship. Therefore, this is a somatic, in other words bodily bonding that is beyond thinking, beyond the Oedipal that is later defined by representation. Bollas (1987) argues that this state can be represented, and it is the role of the psychoanalyst to become the transformational object and help present the dynamism of the client's unthought known.

This theory is of utmost importance and will be revisited through specific contemporary art examples. For now, let it suffice to anticipate that some contemporary art practices also operate similarly, namely in a way that, as transformational objects, they let the unthought-known emerge. More about that later, for now let us leave childhood, and look into what might act as transitional space or transformational object for the adult. By

outlining of these practices we are getting closer to the artistic transitional/transformational space.

5.4 Transitional space in adult life

Winnicott argues that the transitional space, just like the space of the 'I' and the 'not-me', stays with us throughout life. There are extreme cases when the separation from the mother is not successful enough; in such situations the boundaries of reality might not be healthily negotiated and it might even lead to psychosis. However, even if the transitional phase of the child is successful, this potential space stays with us through adult life. Winnicott sees the root of art enjoyment, collecting, and other practices such as religious devotion, substance use (and abuse), rituals, the wearing of talismans or objects of protection as the manifestation of this transitional object/space for the grown-up. In extreme cases, fetishes that one is obsessively attached to or generate sexual excitement (rope, whip and so on) are the transitional object 'continued' in adult life (1971:4).

Bollas, like Winnicott, sees the transformational object in adult life, a deity who is going to save us, a new job, a holiday, a different partner, a new car and so on, as rooted in the transformative experience generated by the mother. The type of remembering of this early phase of ego-development is not a cognitive, but an existential experience and mostly unconscious, given that they feed from the 'unthought-known'. There are fantasies that if/when we get the bigger house, the other woman and so on, the "basic faults" of our existence will be corrected, and we shall 'arrive'; there will be a complete "ego-repair" (Bollas 1987:14-21).

The main difference between Winnicott and Bollas might be that, on the one hand, Winnicott detects some practices that are the continuation of the transitional state of the child and treats them as phenomena that are also present in our lives. On the other hand, Bollas considers that this state is responsible for something beyond manifestations such as wearing talismans, fetishes and other symptoms, namely for our basic inspiration and drives for living. He argues that our unconscious urge for a more complete life springs from this early stage of motherly motivation.

This is not to say that followers of Winnicott have not realized the immense importance of transitional or potential space. Transitional spaces are also recreated for the adult with the intention of changing our reality and the world around us, or at least our attitude towards it. To Winnicott-ians, psychotherapy is also often seen as a transitional space. As psychologist Bonnie Bright suggests: “Psychotherapy is one way in our current culture that we attempt to link the discrepancy between inner and outer, to create that transitional space required to allow each individual to feel safe and to play. Thus, in a clinical sense, we manage to attempt, at least, to recreate that much needed transitional realm which an infant requires for adequate ego-development” (Bright in Elliott (2002), 2010:4).

In this case, Bright argues that psychotherapeutic space is the reconstruction of the transitional space of the infant in which healing can take place. Bollas believes that, in analysis, it is the analyst who becomes the transformational object. He explains that many patients are waiting for the analyst to give them ‘the solution’, to remedy life, in the same way God is expected to save us. The analyst is offering a regressive space for the patient to “relieve infantile life in transference”. In this case, the transformational mother is projected onto the analyst with a certainty that the object will deliver transformation and the ego-work will finally come to an end (1987:25, 27).

Where and how does art come in to all this? Although the transitional object itself is abandoned (or theatrically destroyed), according to Winnicott, we find repetitions and replacements of these objects, and one possible replacement is art appreciation. He sees artistic creativity and art appreciation as the transitional object continued in adult life. How does Winnicott see art as transitional space? Although an extensive analysis is given when I explore contemporary art in the light of this theory, let me present a simple analysis. Let us take any painting or graphic created after the First World War by the German Expressionist painter Otto Dix, such as the *Der Krieg/ The war* (1923-24)² series, for instance. The horrific and devastating images prove to be an easy surface of projection for any experience of loss, terror, war, suffering and so on. When looking at the work, the artworks as transitional object overcome the boundaries of me and not-me, they take the viewer to a third, intermittent zone that is between the artwork and the viewer. The beholder can therefore

² Otto Dix, *Der Krieg* (1923-24). Portfolio of fifty etching, aquatint, and drypoints. Plate (each approx.): 22 x 23 cm; sheet (each approx.): 39.8 x 42.1 cm. MOMA, NY, USA.

revisit private experience that they might have in connection with the topic presented: personal issues of loss, horror, fear and so on can surface; and they can empathize with the work. The works are done with the clear intention of presenting these terrors. They ask the viewer to engage with the presented experience and leave with an altered frame of mind that is also anticipated by the work.

Although such engagement with art is acknowledged by Bollas, he believes the artistic experience, good or bad, comforting or uncanny, lies elsewhere (1987:4,14,15). Art is the reenactment and the continuation of the childhood *transformational* phase. The aesthetic experience is sought and engaged with the intention that it bring transformation. Bollas argues that art is particularly suited for this task as the experience can go deeper than the Oedipal (representational, verbal) phase. Given that art is not (simply) cognitive, it might draw us back to the phase prior to verbalization, before the clear distinction between me and not-me. One example of this is Tino Sehgal's work, *Kiss* (2002)³. This work evokes a very different experience from the drawings of Dix. The performative piece is a 'constructed situation' which draws the observer into a transitory reality through its physicality (darkness, slowness, physical closure of actor), and disrespect of distance. The work, as I saw it enacted at the art fair ARCO, Madrid, 2016, took place in a pitch-dark room. It was an orchestrated, slow motion performance of a nude couple, enacting various famous kisses from art history, such as *The Kiss* by Rodin or Klimt. It took time to adjust to the darkness and even then only the glowing white volume of the figures became visible. They curled, cuddled, moved in a way that seemed like endless slow motion, changing position, going from one posture to the other, kissing. While watching, I found myself in a timeless moment that was not defined by what I was seeing, it was rather characterized by a slow flow of organic whiteness in the dark, fragility and an almost sacred sensation that at the same time felt sensitive and ephemeral. When leaving the dark room, there was not much to 'tell', but there was such a contrast between this work and the rest of the 'art world' out there at the art fair, that I had to leave the venue, as the violent, buzzing, structured, money-oriented, object-focused art market felt like a violation of my senses. What was taking place in the dark room of the *Kiss* is difficult to put in words. I would say that what emerged was *unpresentable*, that is, beyond the verbal. It was a place outside structure, outside the world of money, gain or profit. It was even beyond the figurative, as the sight was most often organic abstraction.

³ Tino Sehgal, *Kiss* (2002). Constructed situation. Dimensions vary.

When Bollas describes the unthought-known, I think he is referring to experiences and realms like this one.

The difference between the two approaches to art appreciation is small, yet significant. As I see it, Winnicott understands art as a site onto which sensations can be projected, whereas Bollas sees it as a tool through which issues that cannot be described, can start emerging, the start of inner work. It appears that Bollas has a more dynamic, active and also more primary, non-representational understanding of art appreciation.

This is how art appreciation might be understood as transitional and transformational experience. However, the connection between art and these concepts is more complex, but more about this later. The previous paragraphs described two psychoanalytic concepts of early childhood development that these practitioners see as the core of the art experience. One can agree with these theories and see how, for instance, a teddy bear can become transitional object for the child and, consequentially, an artwork a site of projection. However, I need to explore *how* it is possible for images of art to function as transitional space or transformational object. The following sub-chapter therefore introduces James Hillman, a psychoanalyst, who sees images and art as potential sites for facilitating transformation.

5.5 Image as transitional space

The transitional and the transformational space of the child have been outlined above, and it was argued that we recreate such spaces in our adult life. It was also suggested that the art experience can also be the continuation of such spaces. How is this possible though? How does art become a transitional or transformational object? And what kind of transitional phenomenon can it generate? Bright (2010) points out that art is capable of generating transitional space in which the individual can re-establish the broken framework of the self and develop a different relationship to the other. Images really are 'potential spaces'. Starting with a quote from Carl Jung, she argues: "'image is soul' and soul is the ultimate state of balance. When the imagination opens, new possibilities arise. Dialogue and interaction with images create narratives in which an individual can locate herself, can test options and integrate outcomes in relationship to the image" (Bright 2010:7).

In other words, Bright considers that in adults images work just like the transitional object operates for the child. Through images we can test various relationships with reality. How is this possible? Bright goes on to explain that “...the nonintrusive symbolic character of imagery is less likely to trigger defenses or resistance, allowing revelation to emerge.... A single image can symbolize or arouse an entire constellation of meanings, which can then be explored” (Hutchinson in Sheikh, 2003 cited by Bright 2010:8).

It appears that through images we can step into a space in which we can play, fantasize, *imagine* and generate new inner, outer and transitional realities. It seems that images can act as possible transitional objects because one cannot argue with them. How irresistible images are is exemplified by the theory of the psychotherapist, James Hillman. While referring to the healing power of the dream, Hillman leads us to the power of the image: “When I’m dreaming at night, I’m in the image” (1983:51). This might mean that while one is with the image, one does not distinguish between ‘I’ and ‘the image’, ‘I’ and ‘the other’. Instead, just like in the transitional space of the child, one becomes one with the image. Hillman believes the dream image is beyond understanding, unthought within the rational realm. He says: “These images make one realize that the patient, me, you, is only relatively real. The images are what really count, and they get so little place in our world, so my job is to let them speak and to speak with them” (1983:52). Hillman is speaking of a very similar kind of negotiation of reality that takes place in the transitional space. Images and I are “relatively real”, just like the ‘I’, the teddy and the outside world. He argues that one needs to develop an active relationship to the (dream) image. Instead of interpretation and distance, one needs to step back into one’s psyche. This domain of the psyche is, as I understand it, the Bollas-ian realm of the unthought known, a state of being that is yet waiting to be represented. Hillman therefore sees the path to the psyche as being through images, images that we *image-in*. As opposed to the rigorous quest for meaning – also particular to Freud-ian psychoanalysis - one needs to look for the imagination of life. In order to practice creative living “we don’t have to be artists but we can change the model, the fantasy we live by, so that we don’t have to imagine ourselves dull and sober and rational and critical, changing it into one that invites the puer in, and all his dangers too” (1983:62).

In other words, images of art trigger the Imaginary.⁴ They can activate the Imaginary and they can also alter it. Once again, it is important because it is through the

⁴ just as it was presented in Chapter Four in the analysis on art and Lacan’s Imaginary.

Imaginary that we construct our Symbolic order, namely the kind of life we are living. To Hillman, images are a special tool towards our inner world, as they are neither discursive nor dualistic. They just evoke, present, ask us to look, but do not carry any value-judgment. Hillman says: “That’s what our dreams are doing and our memories: bringing us to respect ourselves – not *inspect* with guilt – to re-gard what happened yesterday, what happened in childhood and re-spect it. We look again what was forgotten and repressed, we even look again at the mechanisms of forgetting and repressing, and whatever we look at again we gain a new respect for – whether in ourselves or the culture” (1983:119).

According to Hillman, this act of mere looking, being with the image in relative reality activates repressed parts of the self and, just like in the transitional space of the child, how we are in the world might change. Along with the psychoanalysts presented, these ideas echo Freedberg, Mitchell and Gell and even Didi-Huberman who also encourage us to live with images, as opposed to trying to interpret them, as they are more than just representations. It is time to turn to the analysis of specific artworks and see how they can be grasped as agents of the transformational phenomenon.

5.6 Transitional and transformational space in art – from *Madonna* to *Muster*

To being with, let us turn to an example already introduced, the *Madonna* by Raphael and see how it can be understood from the viewpoint of the transformational phenomenon. Given that this chapter is based on the assumption that the space that contemporary art draws us into, is transitory, one can expect to be taken from one way of being in the world to another. Let us see if, as the psychoanalysts above suggest, art really is able to do this, and if so, then how.

Madonna as transitional space



Fig. 29. Raphael, *Madonna of the Goldfinch* (1506)

As explained in Chapter Two, the *Madonna of the Goldfinch* (1506) by Raphael captivates the observer by its stillness, beauty, harmony and perfection. Given that we are looking at an image that is an artwork, the piece, by being able to reach beyond representation, might start acting as a transitional space. Similarly to the transitional space of the child, while we are looking at art, we are drawn into and merged with the artwork, but we also have a conscious knowledge that we are 'us' and what we are looking at is an artwork separate from us. There is a third reality that is evoked by the fusion of the 'I' and 'the artwork' which is the viewer's inner world guided and triggered by the artwork. It is a transitory zone by which borderlines blur and – as Hillman might argue – we shift within relative realities. The composition, colors, light and atmosphere create a space in which we can easily and comfortably unite with this work and enjoy the caressing silence of this blessed, yet playful moment. The piece invites us into a state of purity, motherly love, joy, a longing for a long-lost, a nostalgic fantasy in which we might have experienced such blessed communion with the things of the world. No wonder that the Renaissance with the portrayal of such states of mind became so popular; we feel that having looked at the image, we take some of its otherworldly peace away with us.

The work invites us to accept its clear statement, and we bathe in its graceful being, overcoming the ego-boundaries that would separate us from unification with the work. In this case, the piece works as transitional object in the Winnicott-ian sense. It is a site of

projection, and there are anticipated fantasies contained by the image that one is most likely going to entertain, a set of Imaginary associations one can indulge in and choose from while with the image. In any case, these fantasies can manifest as pre-articulated representations. There is the presence of motherly love, beauty, joy, peace and so on. This could evoke a variety of sensations, making the viewer sad, happy, calm, or nostalgic, but the viewer's Imaginary is given directions. In this sense, the piece can become transitional space, but could we call it a transformational object?

What is going on in contemporary art and in art that might point us to the kind of sensation of ground zero? If the *Madonna* works as a transitional space in which we can revisit our issues with peace, calm, salvation and gentle motherly love – a kind love that we were missing, for instance – then what does contemporary art do? It was suggested earlier that (pre)modern art might be seen as characterized by presence. Here it is suggested that when seen as transitional phenomenon, it can be understood as the Winnicott-ian transitional space. But what about contemporary artistic practices? Moreover, what happens in the case of artworks that create rupture, refusing to offer us presence but instead draw us into absence? In other words, how does transitional space work in the case of art that, instead of giving us a place, as the *Madonna* does, opens an empty space?

In the following paragraphs I will explore how contemporary art works on us when it acts as transitional space or transformational object. Using art to distinguish between the two concepts, I will attempt to show the nature of the transitional space of contemporary art.

Ai Weiwei and direct meaning

Let us take the Ai Weiwei's artwork, *Dropping a Han dynasty urn* (1995)⁵. The work carries rebellion, starts with the shock effect, and questions tradition and set values; this strategy is often used by contemporary art. In this performative work, Ai Weiwei took a piece of historical heritage, a Han dynasty vase, and theatrically dropped it on the floor so it shattered. The work is the documentation of this act and consists of three photographs

⁵ Representation of the act: *Dropping of a Han dynasty urn* (1995-2004). Signed and numbered 3/8 on the right hand panel gelatin silver print on Alu Dibond, in three parts each: 136 x 109cm. MOMA, NY, USA.

forming a triptych. In the first one, the artist is holding the vase, in the second he lets go and, in the third, we see the broken vase. This act of destruction is the artwork itself.

The images invite us to engage with them because, as Hillman explains, due their pictorial nature they are on the borderline of reality; they are as real and unreal as we are. They are representations, yet they take us beyond representation. The piece is obviously brave, scandalous and outrageous, creating an outcry not only in those who care for historical heritage, but also for any observer, given that the artist touches on a cultural taboo. It is not simply the inherent nature of the image that collapses the distance between the picture and the observer, it is also the contradictory nature and shock value that draws one into the piece. Once 'in' the work, what might possibly happen?

If the piece works for us as transitional phenomenon, it makes us interrogate and reevaluate our relationship with a pre-existing value system set by market and culture. It also makes us aware how socially conditioned we are to appreciate objects whose sole value might be that they are old. The piece might also be seen as a comment on the Chinese government and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) that shattered history and erased the beautiful cultural heritage of a nation that would have much to be proud of. In other words, the work directly comments on the following phenomena: it is openly critical of the social framework mentioned above; the western market of antiquity; museums and their strategy of making something into a valuable work of art; and/or the cultural strategy of the Chinese government. It might also comment on the role of the artist, that is, their role to unsettle, trigger, overcome or interrogate. Furthermore, it might also have a personal message to the viewer who would cry in pain when seeing the urn break, as the taboos we are all conditioned to live with are endangered. It is a powerful piece and it is a *direct* commentary with an open interrogative goal in mind. In its transitional space, the observer reconsiders all these set structures, rules and taboos, whether their own or practiced and maintained by society. When it comes to the role of the Imaginary in art, one is directed towards what to imagine. Although there is a tear, a cut into our usual frame of references, this 'cut' is not rupture, given that - no matter how interrogative - after the 'tear' we still find ourselves in a statement. The experience is direct and 'orchestrated'.

In what way is the experience similar to and different from the transitional space of the child? Is it the transitional or transformational object that should be used when understanding how the work operates when transitory? The piece evokes a state similar to

the transitional space of the child, in the sense that one knows and does not know that one is looking at an image: an object outside oneself. In this sense, the ego-boundaries are questioned. However, the experience is different from that of the child as it is without comfort. There is one crucial function of the transitional object of the child: it always offers security. In the transitional space of the child, the mother or the replacement of the mother (teddy) is always there. The main function of the teddy bear or any animated object is to provide safety, to create a holding environment (the extension of the breast), no matter how much it is hated or brutalized by the infant. This cannot be said of the Ai Weiwei piece. The work is certainly more secure than a real life experience, nonetheless, it does not leave us with feeling of being protected and cared for. This might be one of the particularities of many contemporary artistic practices, at least of those that do not strive for comfort, but rather for interrogation.

Can the work be seen as transitional space or transformational object? Given that there is an anticipated Imaginary and a statement, it might be seen closer to the Winnicottian concept, as the Imaginary is aimed in a specific direction with an anticipated representation (the rebellion against a specific structural hegemony) within a given socio-political discourse. In this sense, the work does not fully overcome hegemony (as in Ziarek's sense) as it still operates within a hegemonic framework.

Although the Ai Weiwei work is a direct and violent encounter that leaves us with specific ideas in mind and it can be called teleological, there are artworks that do not offer this path. As also discussed in previous chapters, there are pieces that are not teleological, and do not do not anticipate their own meaning (Rancière 2011). In the following sub-chapter, I will explore one of these artworks from the viewpoint of the transformational phenomenon.

Uncle R as transformational object

Let us revisit *Uncle R* in order to see where we stand in the transitional phenomenon dilemma. In the case of this painting, we know that we are looking at an artwork that portrays a young soldier smeared with blue paint (there is distance) but after a while there is a breaking through the gap generated by representation. The merging with the painting is a very different experience from what we find with Ai Weiwei's piece. It was

argued that the painting actively references art history as if it were part of a tradition, which indeed it is. Streams of associations such as humiliation, war, the past of our family, our political heritage and its impact on our lives emerge in a disorderly manner. Personal associations also surface, which in a sense one cannot avoid, and one brings oneself into the image, making it impossible to escape. Historical heritage in the form of active memories is also brought up that, consciously or not, still characterizes our lives today. The young man, who is a perpetrator yet also subjected to abuse, demands us to look deep into ourselves. How can one handle one's past and how does society do so? How to cope with guilt and with the fact that our very ancestors committed unspeakable crimes, crimes so severe that they cannot even be represented?

One cannot avoid personally relating to the work, but along with a private connection one has a hard time really pinning the piece down. *Uncle R* does not direct us toward 'a specific' set of ideas. It does not give us a specific thread of Imaginary as the Ai Weiwei piece would do. In the case of the *Dropping of the Han dynasty urn*, all possible routes that the artwork initiates can be described with the narrative of 'interrogation of set socio-political standards'. Does *Uncle R* belong to any such framework? By letting go of the immediacy of representation, *Uncle R* evokes in me, the beholder, an empty space through which I can reevaluate my relationship with the things of the world, and not simply with politics and history or art history. The artwork becomes part of me, initiating a negotiation, a reinterpretation of the inner 'other' (history, heritage, pain, violence, injustice, death and so on) in relationship with myself. Given that the painting does not enforce a particular narrative on me and points beyond what it represents, there is space for a multitude of new sensations and images to emerge.

Can the work be said to be a transitional object in the Winnicott-ian sense? Like the Ai Weiwei piece, *Uncle R* does not offer us security. The soldier stands there with his scrutinizing gaze and we cannot expect any comfort from it. Like the teddy in the transitional space of the child, it is there for us to (re)negotiate our relationship with 'the other', our bruised inner self that is also a socio-historical heritage as well as our personal story, but it does not offer the comfort of the teddy, it cannot be transformed into a protective object. One can grow to love it, to feel sorry for it, one can even be angry and frustrated *for* it, but it does not give us a safe space to embrace. It opens up a creative space but not a safe one.

So what is *Uncle R* and how does it operate as transformational? Both Ai Weiwei's piece and *Uncle R* offer what Rancière expects from contemporary art, namely that, instead of direct action and specific change, there could be a reconfiguration of the set of relationships in how we relate to the world. However, *Uncle R* does this in a way that it *does not anticipate its own meaning*, in other words, it does not direct us towards another narrative, even if that narrative is interrogation. We feel that *Uncle R* wants to tell us something, and most likely it is not going to be a testimony as it was the case in Camus' *The Plague* about the Second World War, discussed in Chapter Four. Neither is it going to be an interrogation of the injustices of a political regime that created a value system in which this soldier is a victim; a discourse that we see present in the case of Ai Weiwei. *Uncle R* is not even a person, it is rather a creature of collective and individual, conscious and unconscious, cognitive and emotional stream of memories. *Uncle R* is a site, but, unlike Raphael's *Madonna*, it does not operate as a site of projection in the conventional sense. Its unconventionality lies in the fact that we cannot know what it wants from us. It is a site of absence in which non-teleological associations about aggression, helplessness, being marked and bruised for life might take place.

Put simply, if *Uncle R* is to be seen as a transformational phenomenon, it might be closer to the Bollas-ian argument of the transformational object. There is stimulation, there is disturbance and interrogation, but one does not know where it is all going to lead. There is simply a tearing apart, a rupture is evoked by the piece and one may find oneself shattered but not told how to put the missing pieces together. There are floating associations that can or cannot become representations. There are sensations such as the uncanny, pain, disgust, sorrow and so on. When looking at the work we might or might not even know why we are feeling like this. *Uncle R* disturbs, triggers, unsettles, and that is where it leaves us. It does not stick to a particular social narrative. Even though the surface story of the piece might be connected to the Second World War, it is quickly overcome and there is not a particular object one can hold onto. The work can either be seen as a transitional space without the transitional object or can be understood as a transformational object in which 'objecthood' itself is 'deobjectified', as it is a process, a dynamic and motivating non-teleological space that might be associated with the transformational space outlined by Bollas.

The question that now needs answering is why does all this matter? It might be the case that *Uncle R* can be seen as a transformational object that evokes sensations and

drives, fantasies and associations in an unanticipated, disorderly manner. Why is it important to engage with art that can act as such? What potentials lie within contemporary art as a transformational object? This question is explored through the analysis of the third part of the Wedemeyer film *Muster*.

Muster as a transformational object outside hegemony

In order to substantiate the argument about how some contemporary artworks can operate as non-teleological sites of transformation and what potentials lie in this space, I reintroduce the film *Muster* by Wedemeyer. This time I will concentrate on the third part of the movie in order to see just what kind of a transitional experience it generates and what potentials it carries for us, today, in the 21st century. This part of the film is clearly talking to contemporary observers as it is placed in 1994, and centers around a contemporary narrative, a school-trip to Breitenau. Simplistic as it may sound, the experience is far from being a distant act of looking at history. First of all, 1994 is a date we can all remember well and the public who would be addressed by the piece probably has vivid, possibly grown-up memories from those times. So the film arrives in 'our times' and explores how we, as contemporary subjects, might be dealing with the issues already addressed by the previous parts, enacted in the past. For Breitenau, 1994 is a significant date as well: it was the year when the film *Bambule* by Ulrike Meinhof was first shown on TV, as until then the government had banned the showing of the film. The first scene in the Wedemeyer film takes place the day after the first public screening of *Bambule*. Although no real excuses were given for not showing the film prior to this date, it is most likely that the government was concerned about the rebellious and revelatory aspect of the film in shedding light on the controlling practices of the capitalist hegemony practiced in Germany after the Second World War. Therefore, 1994 can be seen as a date of revelation when the shadows of the past were finally exposed.

The 1994 part takes the evocation of the past by present experience as its subject-matter. It is from this subject-matter that I argue *Muster* is able to point beyond its own dilemma. First let me highlight a few scenes from the film and see what, on the level of subject-matter, they have to say. Then I will explore how what is shown actually takes the viewer beyond the narrative as well as conscious associations.

The present is always defined by the past, and whenever there is a moment of change or transformation, the past also becomes reevaluated. How do these events and mechanisms of history impact our lives today? In the following, I present some scenes from the film that capture how the youth of today is influenced by this heritage. In the first scene, we find ourselves in a dark place that looks like a bar. A young man, the protagonist, maybe still an adolescent, not in very good shape and possibly drugged, opens the curtain to a screening room where some students and a teacher are watching *Bambule*.



Fig. 30. Still *Muster* (2012) from part 1994



Fig. 31. screenshot *Muster* (2012) from part 1994

The protagonist walks in, leans over the TV and the scenes burn onto his retina (fig. 30., fig. 31.). It really seems like a scene of madness in which the actor loses his sense of behavior – actually for the first time in this three part film. After all the insanity that has taken place in history, it is our generation, those who did not suffer directly, but rather from the hereditary consequences, who can allow themselves to go mad. But can they really? Madness would mean a rejection of the social norms, an existence outside the social bond defined by ‘health’. Is real madness possible in our times? The film does not show? any outrageous, out of the ordinary behavior after this boy's gesture. However, that would be expected, as we learn that *Bambule* means rebellion.

With the concept of revolt, the spectator is immediately drawn into the problems of our times. What does youth today have to do with rebellion? What is left for them to rebel against? The subject-matter of the film evokes complex associations. Does rebellion make any sense; does it have any point in the 21st century? At the Breitenau site rebellion took place openly and had, in a straightforward manner, done so before. The site was a prison, a concentration camp and a detention home; all of them are places that openly represent power which people could rebel against. But what is youth today rebelling against? What is there in today's Western (European) society so impossible to live with, that it has to be rebelled against? Today's youth does not have an easy job. Even if objects of rebellion are found, it seems as if every form of revolt is hopeless, as no matter what is being done, one cannot escape the capitalist hegemony in which everybody is treated as a product and a producer. Is there space for revolt? Is there a way to break out *from somewhere to somewhere* else in a world that is completely intertwined with capitalist hegemony? Our ‘prison’ is created in a way that it becomes – at least for the majority of Europe and the US – the ‘happiest barrack’ in which imprisonment is considered the norm, and citizens do not even realize that life could be lived in any other way.

The film very subtly reminds us that there is no breaking out. In one of the scenes, the teacher orders all the students to go into a room that in the 1970s was where the girls were put for solitary confinement. He explains that the newcomers were locked away there for the first week in order to “break them in”. The dialogue between the teacher and the students is as follows: “Do you know what you want to do?” asks the teacher.

A girl, acted by the same actress who played Amélie answers: “Be an actress”.

The teacher, intending to be ironic, replies that wanting to be an artist was already enough for sending someone into solitary confinement, at a detention house like this. Then another boy says, when answering the question 'what do you want to do': "Che Guevara". "That's not an occupation" replies the teacher.

The protagonist boy interrupts violently: "At least we don't want to end up like you".

And the teacher retorts: "You'll never manage that!"

In other words, there is no way to break out of the system. The students come up with possible ways of thinking outside or critiquing the system; one is through art (actress), the other is through politics (Che Guevara). Although there is nothing wrong with the teacher, still, by the mere role he plays in society he becomes the object of rejection and disgust in the eyes of the students. They exclaim that although that do not know what they want to do, they definitely do not want to continue what the teacher is doing ("At least we don't want to end up like you"). The teacher's cynical answer ("You'll never manage that!") could stand as an assurance that the hegemonic system will also take care of you: there is no way for doing *otherwise*.

Although the entire being of these teenagers can be seen as an act of protest, one wonders if any action, any *being otherwise* could follow. The boy listens to music while the teacher talks. He wanders off, arrives late, obviously bored, and hates the entire situation. This hopelessness, frustration, yet boredom and ignorance that the protagonist carries throughout the third part recalls recent sociological research on the 21st century 'silent generation'. Hungarian sociologists such as Levente Székely (2013) liken the way people aged 15-29 born after 1985 behave in the same way as the youth between the two World Wars (1920-1940). That generation was called 'silent', as they were without motivation and lacked the energy to generate change. The 'silent generation, today are also passive and introverted, disillusioned by the structure, goal, and purpose of in the 21st century. Furthermore, ignorance of politics, mistrust of public structure and institutions, ranging from marriage to the government and, above all, a high level of conformism, are attitudes with which they live their lives. Székely (2013) explains that these people see change and the need to act as pointless. They do not believe in the power of change, that things can be done otherwise. Even when they talk about politics, they do so in a way that one would feel one was talking to someone in their 70s who has seen it all and no matter what could be done,

there is no point in doing it, as everything would stay the same anyway. The goals that were reached by the parents are no longer inviting as there is a general disillusionment from working hard towards obtaining happiness through higher standards of living. It is not to say that there is no frustration in these people, there is, however it is doubtful that it could lead to new alternatives (http://www.hetek.hu/belfold/201309/itt_a_csendes_generacio).

The heritage of the 1970s rebellion therefore does not continue in the youth of today. What about the Holocaust? How does youth cope with the Holocaust today and how does that relate to rebellion? The inability to revolt might be seen as related to the Holocaust. People born after 1980 are said to be defined by holocaust fatigue. Holocaust fatigue comes with symptoms such as disinterestedness, burnout and an unwillingness to engage with the event. As lecturer, Simone Schweber, remarks in her article on holocaust fatigue: "As a friend of mine who teaches 9th grade history remarked recently, 'My kids are sick of it, sick of the Holocaust'" (2006:50).

Fatigue, often associated with boredom, might spring from two factors: one is the fact that the Holocaust was too traumatic and too painful to digest and therefore today is contextualized as a phenomenon that Schweber (2006) calls 'Holocaust-awe'. There is a silent, church-like sacralization of the Holocaust and this behavior prevents youth from getting closer to its actual weight and complexity. The other is the overrepresentation of the Holocaust in a way that either trivializes the phenomenon or reduces it to a mere narrative. Whatever the case, the Holocaust is not embraced; the trauma cannot be empathized with, and it is reduced to representation, events and numbers. Should there be a proper engagement with the subject, it would probably send youth 'off the wall', as was the case in the Shoshana Felman workshop that addressed Holocaust without distance. Felman explains that her workshop was so 'successful' in engaging students with the trauma that the group itself became acutely (re)traumatized (1992:1-57).

The third part of *Muster* therefore can also be understood in the light of Holocaust fatigue. The tangible tension and distress during the scenes that mainly come from the young male protagonist can be seen as clear symptoms. It is easier to reject, as engagement would be too much to bear. For these kids, given that they are German, this is especially difficult as there is the factor of guilt. It is also impossible to ignore that the forefathers were the perpetrators and the sins reincarnate. The extent to which this trauma and guilt is carried on is subtly exemplified in one of the scenes. Outside the building, while the teacher

introduces the site, the kids stand around him, leaning against the wall. While explaining, the teacher forms a pistol with his index finger and thumb and points at the kids around him. As an undertone to the scene we hear the band singing the lyrics “The murderers are living in every street” (fig. 32.).



Fig. 32. screenshot *Muster* (2012) from part 1994

The scene is subtle, so we do not know if this gesture is explicit or accidental. Nonetheless memories from the 1945 scene come back and the viewer remembers how, under different circumstances, this place was used as an execution site and in different political times the kids could have become the victims with the teacher their perpetrator. “The way the grandparents were traumatized is perpetuated over generations” is a key sentence we hear at 12min. 30sec. One could say that this phrase is a simple explanation of why the youth of today feels so miserable. If the film stopped here, it could be seen as a strong Holocaust film, but it would stay within those limitations, and could be placed in an interpretive framework. But the film continues.

The group visits the site in the garden where prisoners were shot and buried, then the music starts and we find ourselves in a psychedelic rock concert. The verses are in line with both the Holocaust and the depression of adolescence, yet take the hardships that

characterize both onto a universal level and point beyond them. The singer chants: “Waiting in this loneliness, is the king’s child, waiting for the end of torment. Fear of madness, fear of truth, fear of daring, fear of yourself, rigid, facing life’s agony which goes on forever”.

In other words, there is a universal agony that becomes probably the most obvious in situations of horror such as the Holocaust, but also surface in general during teenage years. This torment – just like the Holocaust – is unrepresentable. We hear the boy’s restless breathing while dancing (fig. 33.)



Fig. 33. screenshot *Muster* (2012) from part 1994

The viewer is left with the agitated respiration of the boy and senses his exhausted intention to get rid of his own misery. It is the misery of the ‘human condition’ that becomes especially tangible in politically pressing times and situations such as authoritarian regimes, Holocaust or detention homes.⁶ This weight of the human condition that becomes tangible but is not defined by historical hardships sits on every single one of us and that is what the boy wants to shake off while dancing at the concert, ‘waiting for the end of torment’. This torment though is cannot presented. It comes joined to the breathing, it can be overcome by

⁶ I understand the term ‘human condition’ as a conscious awareness of the existential experience of being human. The realization of ‘being human’ can vary in experience from moments of objectless joy to acute depression.

it, but it comes with who we are, from the first breath to the last. Slowly the music dies away and only the stumping and the breathing are heard. The frustration, the pain that has been carried over to the present throughout history is clinging onto everyone. Is there a way to talk about this? Is there a way to represent Holocaust? Was there a way to represent imprisonment? Is there a way to show the condition that defines the youth of today in the 'production-prison'? Can the silent generation have a voice? Is there a way to tell how it really feels to carry the human condition further burdened by history? The stumping and the sound of breathing, the sweat on the boy's forehead, the body dancing in desperation, depression and anger: through means that are beyond the articulated, beyond representation, these drives that cannot take a form because they are beyond the representable come through in – as Bollas would say – “dance”, in the body and through its sounds. Similarly to Part One and Two of *Muster* in which trauma can emerge because there is absence (space) for the void and space is given for admitting the impossibility to express, impossibility also emerges in this part, too. This impossibility lies in not being able to engage, not being able to relate or voice issues outside hegemony. This part of *Muster* therefore can be seen as a transformational object in the sense that it draws the viewer into a space in which this frustration and impossibility arises outside of representation. This frustration is more than just a historical heritage that could be talked about; it is part of the human condition. There is simply the sound of claustrophobic, violent breathing through which one stays in the unrepresentable, in the unutterable within the unthought- known.

In the previous paragraphs I argued that the strength and importance of this film lies not only in its ability to evoke various associations regarding history, pain and the tragedy of the past (Holocaust, detention) and issues of the present (silent generation), but the film also works through us as transformational object by evoking the unrepresentable, the space beyond the Oedipal, a realm of drives that Bollas defines as the unthought-known. Let us look at the force of this work from the perspective of the entire chapter. One can see that the transitional nature of this work is very different from that of the *Madonna* image or the work by Ai Weiwei. The piece does not offer presence, a connection with something otherworldly, as with the *Madonna*. Neither does it aim to transmit a particular interrogative narrative (as with the Ai Weiwei) – whether a statement or interrogation. Instead, there is space opened up for something that is beyond representation. The work draws us into a

state of unuttered drives, frustration and void. It is a state prior to the rational, prior to verbalization, and can be seen as an urge but an urge towards what? The artwork operates as space, defined by drives that do not take shape but there is tangible frustration, the need to do something but not knowing what to do. This not-knowing, the silence and void surely cannot be experienced, therefore is empathized with through a statement, through something positive. The famous phrase of Adorno, namely that one cannot write poetry after Auschwitz seems to be the case. Or, to be precise, poetry can be written, but a very different kind of poetry is needed. What has happened and what is happening now cannot be fitted into our usual social frame of references. There is a need for poetry/art therefore, that takes a perspective outside this social framework we are bound by and taught to exist in. This is the essential nature of rupture and that of 'ground zero', namely a learning to live outside social hegemony, but not in a new, different kind of structure, but rather in a non-teleological space.

Using Lacan, the transformational space of *Muster* does not dictate an Imaginary that points towards and anticipated Symbolic as this non-teleological space is not prescriptive. There is deconstruction in this space, without any preconceptions and intentions to be in any form in the world. *Muster* as transformational object evokes the basic drives, that 'unthought known', evoked by our inability of trying to, yet not being able to neither live in, nor escape the hegemonic, capitalist 'utopia' we have built for ourselves, and which has become a nightmare. In this space, the Imaginary works as if one were in a dream space. Random associations float and we do not know yet what is going to come out when/if representations start emerging again. There is inner, psychological work taking place through *Muster* as transformational object but without the promise of 'healing' as there would be in psychotherapy. Still, staying with this space might be a unique experience as we have the chance to stay outside an enforced hegemony, taking the complexity of how we are in the world and going down to a state that can be experienced as 'ground zero', in which nothing remains and nothingness can emerge with all its potentials. This is a state of active work on an existential level that is not normative.

Why does all this matter for us now, in the 21st century, for people that are concerned with the future of the planet? It becomes obvious from Mieke Bal's summary on Bollas' concept of the unthought-known that this realm evoked by art can never be a matter of the past, but is a space that is here for us now, in the present: "The concept of the

unthought-known refers to what the senses sense, of which one has a sense but which rational thought can only encircle, not translate into singular meaning. Such translation would be its death, for the work would cease to operate on the multiplicity of levels – rational and affective, theoretical and visual – that are required for it to continue to be *recognized by the present 'as one of its own concerns'...*" (2002:92, italics, DV).

In other words, it reveals the realization of the unthought-known, this deep realm of the self as a concern of today. It is a realm beyond the dualistic ego, beyond the Oedipal and the 'you' versus 'I'. One cannot know how to instruct or drive the unthought-known. Art in this sense is unlike therapy, in which no clues are given where and how to continue. The confrontation and revaluation of our personal unthought-known is truly a most valuable experience as it can reveal the drives behind our carefully constructed reality and can possibly make us view them differently. This is indeed a gift and a unique experience and I can hardly recall any other practices that personally drag the individual beyond hegemony in order to reconsider, in their entire physicality, how they are in the world.