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Niki Tulk: Performing the Wound

Based on the assumption that most people have experienced trauma in some form, the artist and researcher Niki Tulk asks the reader to rethink it as normative rather than atypical. In *Performing the Wound*, her central aim is to find ways for artists and audiences to deal with trauma truthfully and ethically, ways that lead to healing. The work of artist, philosopher, psychoanalyst, and theoretician Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger (b. 1948) serves as the foundation for Tulk's investigation of the potential of art as a space of recovery where trust and compassion may be rekindled. The author introduces a "matrixial body-/feminist- centered perspective" (2) to conduct her analysis, which revolves around how performance artists can facilitate the expression of trauma.

Ettinger's concept of the matrixial zone is particularly useful to Tulk to examine the encounter between the audience and the artwork as a "non-hierarchical relational space that dissolves the subject-object dichotomy [and replaces it with an experience of] *dual subjectivity*" (4). In her introduction, she explains that the fluid and shifting nature of the matrixial space supports an ethical and compassionate experience of art that deals with trauma. Although this experience admits certain violence, conflict, or suffering, both witnesses and survivors take part in healing work by "carrying" each other (5). This particular area of focus makes this study relevant to scholars interested in critical and experimental spectatorship.

Tulk's method was inspired by Kristen Kreider's *Poetics and Place* (2013) [1], particularly the idea of writing about art that "listens" to or "reads" the work closely and thoroughly records the spatial circumstances of the encounter and the viewer's response (14). She also relies on autoethnography and embodied perspective. It is rare to appreciate artwork in an open-ended process of becoming through the writing, as the author intends, rather than reading a conclusive critique. For example, regarding her experience of Ann Hamilton's *the theatre is a blank page* (2018), Tulk reflects: "I had the uncanny sensation of painless drowning, or that I was perhaps a drowned body held still under the surface of water, aware of the soft burden of memories as the family played in the waves, and the woman's hand painted" (73). Such attentive writing is remarkable in its development of what Minna Salami calls "sensuous knowledge". [2] Through this concept, Salami challenges the pre-eminence of logic and rationality and the idea of knowledge as something to be controlled, possessed, and accumulated. Instead, she posits knowledge as a creative, pliable, "living and breathing entity" (15). Similarly, Tulk productively establishes a reciprocal relationship between theory and artistic practice: what she calls '*felt theory*' (81).

The book's second chapter builds on the theoretical framework presented in the introduction. Tulk recontextualises trauma studies for performance and argues that the two have always been intertwined and share a liminal, unfixed quality. Her historical account of trauma theory draws from multiple fields, including philosophy, psychoanalysis, holocaust studies, postcolonialism, and decoloniality. It stresses that since trauma exceeds cerebral knowledge, art is exceptionally positioned to fully address its rupture. This chapter provides insight into the intricate relationship between trauma and storytelling. However, such a lengthy literature review is not strictly needed and could have been significantly abridged, especially considering the theoretical framing of the introduction and its constructive use in the following chapters. The length and detail of this section may perhaps best be explained by the fact that the book results from the author's PhD dissertations in Theatre & Performance Studies and Intermedia Art, Writing & Performance, which she worked on simultaneously.

The following chapters present case studies that the author selected based on her recognition of Ettinger's matrixial zone in the artists' work and their profound and caring approach to trauma. Tulk's examination of work by Ann Hamilton (b. 1956), Renée Green (b. 1959), and Cecilia Vicuña (b. 1948) concentrates on the

reciprocal audience-performance relationship, based on the idea of "ethical witnessing/wit(h)nessing" (3), which avoids voyeurism or re-traumatisation. In each case, Tulk proposes specific interpretive ideas that originate from her "embodied methodology". Below, I discuss some of the most compelling.

First, Tulk's analysis of Hamilton's multimedia installations concentrates on the works' "textual materiality" (43): the material use of language and its bodily perception. For example, Tulk investigates Hamilton's artistic strategies to translate Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and its traumatic content (the writer's history of incest and sexual abuse) into an aesthetic encounter in *The theatre is a blank page* (co-directed with Anne Bogart, 2018). Tulk considers the use of space, textiles, film, light, sound, live actors, the installation's distinct temporality and symbolism, and the audience's visceral response to the text. She argues that in a similar spirit to the novel's, the performance conveyed trauma as a "pulsing, unnamed presence" (64) that resonated with the audience. Therefore, the work fostered the reciprocity of the matrixial space and the co-carrying of each other that enables healing.

The next chapter examines Green's film installations *Walking in NYL* (2016) and *Climates and Paradoxes and Selected Life Indexes* (2005), which explore colonial and racial violence that has been concealed or dealt with in Lisbon, Portugal, and Berlin, Germany, respectively. Tulk draws the reader's attention to Green's "filmic mapping": her documentation of silence and the emergence of past wounds. For instance, Tulk considers the effect of Green's open camera work, which makes the viewer aware of the colonial gaze, disrupts it, and creates a sense of shareability. Tulk's detailed account considers Green's films as "a body writing in space" (93) that expresses trauma through the combination of sound, landscape, architecture, and camera work. Green's movement writes "storied maps" (95) that, as Tulk argues, position viewers as witnesses of trauma that the cities have paradoxically embodied and banished. In this case, the opportunity for social healing stems from Green's focus on people's everyday activities, which presents trauma as "a layered, multiple and extensive scenario" (117) rather than an exceptional event.

The third and final case study focuses on Vicuña's work and its concern with colonial, gendered, and ecological violence. This chapter draws on writer and curator Jill Bennett's interest in the visual and performative languages of trauma and art's position between an affective and critical function. Tulk identifies the ethical quality of Vicuña's work in its "generative friction" (129): a "separate-togetherness" (130) in the encounter between participants that allows both discomfort and a sense of community. For Tulk, this dual interconnection (between participants and with the earth) follows Ettinger's model of "the womb as a container for experience" (137). For example, in the collective performance *Cantos de Agua (Water Songs)* (2015), Tulk observes Vicuña's symbolic, combined use of voice and textiles to move the affect of trauma between participants. She studies the performance's ritualistic aspects, healing potential, nurturing of collectiveness, and refusal of othering.

Recent, closely related titles include *Staging Trauma: Bodies in Shadow* (2018) by Miriam Haughton [3], which focuses on British and Irish marginalised performance practices, and *Contemporary Black Theatre and Performance: Acts of Rebellion, Activism, and Solidarity* (2023), a transdisciplinary volume edited by DeRon S. Williams, Khalid Y. Long, and Martine Kei Green-Rogers. [4] Among the existing literature, *Performing the Wound* foregrounds the place of trauma at the core of performance. Tulk persuasively moves away from the framing of art as spectacle and a site of voyeurism towards her conception of an ethical, truthful encounter as a space of human connection, a site of wit(h)nessing. This book puts forward a valuable, widely relevant theoretical framework for contemporary performance that could significantly enrich future practice and scholarly work on artists such as Otobong Nkanga (b. 1974), Alberta Whittle (b. 1980), Adela Goldbard (b. 1979), Doris Salcedo (b. 1958), and many others. Tulk's case studies demonstrate the fundamental experience of art through feeling before thinking. Her writing reveals a way of knowing through the body that cares deeply about the work and preserves its unsettledness and ultimate unknowability.

Notes:


[1] Kristen Kreider: *Poetics and Place. The Architecture of Sign, Subjects and Site (International Library of Cultural Studies 34)*, London, 2014.

[2] Minna Salami: *Sensuous Knowledge. A Black Feminist Approach for Everyone*, London, 2020.

[3] Miriam Haughton: *Staging Trauma. Bodies in Shadow*, Dublin, 2018.

[4] DeRon S. Williams / Khalid Y. Long / Martine Kei Green-Rogers (eds.): *Contemporary Black Theatre and Performance. Acts of Rebellion, Activism, and Solidarity*, London, 2023.

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