

## **After Aftershock: The Affect–Trauma Paradigm One Generation After 9/11**

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### **Abstract**

In the years following the powerfully emotive images of the events of 9/11 in the United States, theories concerning affect and trauma proliferated across the humanities. A complex and productive field of enquiry developed over the following two decades, which has flourished in art theory, visual culture, and the humanities at large into what we call the ‘affect–trauma paradigm’. This is now a dominant lens through which we understand the current images of war, political violence, and terror that play a central role in the mediation of world events. This article briefly traces the rise of the affect–trauma paradigm in art theory and areas of the broader humanities to historicise its development after 9/11 and to acknowledge its limitations. In particular, we consider the influence of Cathy Caruth’s ideas around trauma from the mid-1990s, which have heavily inflected the affect–trauma field in the humanities since 9/11. We find that the ‘Caruthian tradition in trauma studies’, as Griselda Pollock calls it, characteristically conflates ideas of personal trauma and cultural trauma, which proves to be problematic. This conflation in turn creates a conceptual impasse in post-9/11 art theory, in which considerations of contemporary art in term of affect and trauma become irreconcilable with the limits of the intersubjective transactions of art.

### **Article**

As we write this sentence, the United States is commemorating the eighteenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. A generation, some of whom are now adults, has been born since that event and has never experienced the pre-9/11 world. As emerging academic researchers back in 2001, we knew intuitively and immediately that this event would in some ways define our generation of thinkers. In this article, we set some of the groundwork for our ongoing examination of contemporary art and visual culture surrounding war, terror, and political conflict one generation after 11 September 2001, reflecting upon one of the central impacts of 9/11 on our intellectual field of art theory—the accelerated development of theories around affect and trauma across humanities disciplines within the immediate post-9/11 ‘moment’ of 2001 to roughly 2008. In her 2007 edited volume *The Affective Turn*, Patricia Clough coins that term to encapsulate the emergence and consolidation of a wave of post-9/11 theory across a range of humanities disciplines, one that addresses extra-cognitive meaning operating primarily in psychological and embodied realms beyond the linguistic, in the felt intensity of sensation and emotion.<sup>1</sup> Ruth Leys characterises ‘the general turn to affect’ in the humanities and social sciences as occurring across ‘history, political theory, human geography, urban and environmental studies, architecture, literary studies, art history and

criticism, media theory, and cultural studies'.<sup>2</sup> Within the same post-9/11 timeframe, the humanities field of trauma studies had emerged from a niche concern in the 1990s into an expanded and established interdisciplinary field that, by 2010, Antonio Traverso and Mick Broderick described as being 'sometimes presented as an all-inclusive master paradigm, a grand model that would fit and fulfil all cases'.<sup>3</sup> And, over the past two decades, the vast body of material in the humanities around affect and trauma has consolidated into what we term the affect–trauma paradigm. The elision of the related intellectual strands of affect theory and trauma theory in the humanities was already underway prior to 2001. However, 9/11 intensified and accelerated this process and, moreover, necessitated the theorising of this historical event in terms of shock and emotion. This created the intellectual crucible in which this theoretical alloy would be fused, resulting in the explosion of a hybrid affect–trauma paradigm that influenced key art theory works that emerged in the immediate post-9/11 moment. Ernst van Alphen's work on trauma and affect in contemporary art connected art theory with trauma studies,<sup>4</sup> which was taken up quickly by other art theorists post-9/11,<sup>5</sup> such as Jill Bennett in her 2005 *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art*, which consolidated affect as the natural language of trauma.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Leys' 2017 *The Ascent of Affect* saw the increasing expansion of affect theory as a mutation and re-emergence of trauma theory;<sup>7</sup> in fact, she said as early as 2009, 'affect is the new trauma'.<sup>8</sup> In truth, affect theory in the humanities emerged in parallel with and in part influenced by trauma theory in the late 1990s, and while the fields differ in some of their key players, canons, ideas and terminology, significant overlaps have melded the fields in important ways.

Over two decades of rapid development in the humanities of affect and trauma theory, this paradigm has established itself as the conceptual water in which we now swim. With its entrenched set of ideas, language, and tropes, it is the go-to model for thinking about contemporary images of war and conflict. When Canadian historian Laura Brandon examines the contemporary art of Gertrude Kearns, or Australian art historian Catherine Speck considers the war art work of Hilda Rix Nicholas, it is within the context of theories of affect, trauma, and emotion.<sup>9</sup> Affect and trauma appear as the natural theoretical languages for addressing war, 'waged through a micropolitics operating at the scale of bodies in the flow of affect and sensation awash with peaks of intensity and noticeable disappearances.'<sup>10</sup> We have ourselves frequently turned to theories of affect and trauma to consider the display practices of recent Holocaust museum exhibitions,<sup>11</sup> or to interpret the paintings of returned Australian soldiers by official war artist Ben Quilty.<sup>12</sup> Joanna Bourke's article in this same special issue of the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* reflects on the interlinking themes of affective performativity, trauma, and empathy and their centrality in current debates on war art. However, in a recent interview, Bourke herself suggested the historicising of 'the trauma paradigm', that as a set of theoretical tools for conceptualising the world, it has become entrenched and perhaps even a spent force in our ways of thinking about war: 'when we see "trauma" in the title of the book, we actually know what the argument is going to be now. I think that we have reached the end of that particular way of understanding our world.'<sup>13</sup> Similarly to Bourke, we suspect that in recent years the affect–trauma paradigm has tended to homogenise discourse into consistent analyses with fewer productive surprises. Echoing Traverso and Broderick's observation of a decade ago, the affect–trauma paradigm is now

well established as a nuanced, complexified, cross-referential, factional and actively evolving body of literature. It is important for us to be clear about our intentions here. We are not attempting in this article the near-impossible task of characterising and encompassing the expansive fields of trauma and affect in the humanities; we address here only an iceberg tip of the affect–trauma paradigm, and then only some key moments pertinent to our discipline. Our intention is not to address the dominant affect–trauma paradigm to review its literature, or to rehearse and remount its familiar formulations, but instead to consider some of its key characteristics in ways that denaturalise them. Specifically, here we identify a shared ancestry across the humanities within Cathy Caruth’s 1996 *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*<sup>14</sup> and the influence of Caruth’s characteristic formulations on trauma studies and, in turn, art theory post-9/11. We aim to historicise the development of the affect–trauma paradigm in art theory, to shift its tense and potentially open up different ways of thinking about images of war, terror, and conflict into the future.

### **Art Theory’s Turn**

It is important to understand that in the post-9/11 moment, theorists who were invested in the development of ideas around trauma and affect were asserting a generational shift, actively resisting what, in 2008, Norman K. Denzin characterised as ‘using worn-out languages to talk about the states we were in’.<sup>15</sup> In 2005, Bennett’s influential *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art* positioned the growing field of humanities affect and trauma theory as defying the gravitational pull of a return of theoretical discourse to the semiotic approach that had predominated during the preceding decades. Specifically for art theory, Bennett saw in ideas of trauma and affect ‘a counter to the turn to the real’.<sup>16</sup> For Bennett, Hal Foster’s 1996 *Return of the Real* represented the ‘old “communicational” models that rest on the assumption that content is transmitted via text and image’, which ‘began to haunt discussions around imagery relating to war, violence, terror and trauma’.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the emerging confluence of humanities theories of trauma and affect in the late 1990s can be understood as a broader paradigmatic turn away from the prevailing poststructuralism that, having emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, dominated cultural theory in the 1980s, becoming ‘capital-T Theory’. Brian Massumi, commenting in 1995, wrote, ‘Theoretical moves aimed at ending Man end up making human culture the measure of all things.’<sup>18</sup> By the 1990s, critical theory’s attempts to untether signification from any and all forms of humanist logos had ‘become very abstract’, in the words of E. Ann Kaplan in her account of the rise of trauma studies. She writes, ‘Critics tended to be wary of falling back into an insufficiently theorized Marxism, on the one hand, or into an insufficiently theorized concept of the body and the subject, on the other.’<sup>19</sup> As Richard Grusin sees it, affect theory provided ‘an alternative model to the human subject and its motivations to the post-structuralist psychoanalytical models favoured by most contemporary cultural and media theorists. Affectivity helps shift the focus from representation to mediation.’<sup>20</sup> The affect–trauma paradigm presented ways of thinking through the disconnection of semiotics from the materiality of the signifier and its limitations in terms of conceptualising emotional intensity and other non-linguistic phenomena.

In the arena of art theory, during a decade in which Jean Baudrillard's 'Precession of the Simulacrum'<sup>21</sup> and Yves-Alain Bois's 'Painting: The Task of Mourning'<sup>22</sup> reigned, the poststructuralist certainty of the socially constructed world of signs pervaded the curatorial visions of international biennales and Pompidou shows as well as academic conferences such as the 1984 *Futur\*Fall* conference in Sydney, where Baudrillard was mobbed by several hundred people.<sup>23</sup> However, amidst the political realities of the late 1980s, that certainty began to unravel, particularly in the 'firestorms over funding and censorship' that came to be known as the 'Culture Wars' of 1989,<sup>24</sup> initially in response to Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*—a photographic image of a crucifix immersed in urine—condemned by US conservatives,<sup>25</sup> followed by Washington DC's Corcoran Gallery's cancellation of the Robert Mapplethorpe retrospective, *The Perfect Moment*, under pressure from Republican Senator Jesse Helms.<sup>26</sup> Still convinced that Western culture was experiencing the 'waning of affect' in the early 1990s,<sup>27</sup> art theory found ways of understanding the 1989 Culture Wars in the psychoanalytic twist on 'the semiotic' in the work of Julia Kristeva, leading to a brief fashionable interest within art theory and criticism in Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*.<sup>28</sup> The Whitney Museum of American Art's 1993 exhibition *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*<sup>29</sup> included Serrano's *Piss Christ* but also retrospectively enlisted works from earlier generations (Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* from 1917, Andy Warhol's 1978 *Oxidation Paintings*, and Lynda Benglis's 1974 *Artforum* advertisement), arguing for the fundamental political force of the abject.<sup>30</sup> In 1994, Frazer Ward noted, 'More than a decade after the translation into English of *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva presides over what Rhonda Lieberman has called the "rich flowering of abjection in the artworld".'<sup>31</sup>

Hal Foster launched his *Return of the Real* (1996) as a clear rebuttal to the 'infantilism' of 'the abject artist (like Andres Serrano)',<sup>32</sup> but also to the emergence of a tendency across art, theory, and popular culture 'to redefine experience, individual and historical, in terms of trauma', thus guaranteeing the subject<sup>33</sup> and, we imagine to Foster's chagrin, undoing all the hard work of poststructuralism. He asked, 'why this fascination with trauma, this envy of abjection, today?', and he was very close to the mark as he went on to speculate that it might stem from the 'dissatisfaction with the textualist [semiotic] model of culture' at a time of the AIDS crisis, disease, death, poverty, and the destruction of the welfare state.<sup>34</sup> Placed in its historical context, we now see Foster's *Return of the Real* caught in the wilderness of a transitional moment between the weakening grip of the poststructuralist semiotic frame and yet-to-be-formulated ideas of affect.

Around the same time as *Return of the Real*, Brian Massumi published his seminal essay, 'The Autonomy of Affect', emerging from Deleuzian philosophy into terrain that had yet to be clearly theorised.<sup>35</sup> Massumi argued, 'There seems to be a growing feeling within media, literary and art theory that affect is central to an understanding of our information and image based late capitalist culture', yet 'The problem is that there is no cultural-theoretical vocabulary specific to affect.'<sup>36</sup> For Massumi, the political realities of the time demanded something other than a textual unpacking of meaning on the one hand or an analysis of the extra-linguistic on the other—'an asignifying philosophy of affect'.<sup>37</sup> He wrote, 'Our entire

vocabulary has derived from theories of signification that are still wedded to structure even across irreconcilable differences (the divorce proceedings of poststructuralism: terminable or interminable?).<sup>38</sup> Massumi presaged the rise of the affect–trauma paradigm at a time when interest in the body and sensation was growing within contemporary art, manifesting perhaps most prominently in the Saatchi exhibition *Sensation*, which included works by Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Marc Quinn, Mona Hatoum, and Chris Ofili, and toured London (1997), Berlin (1998), and Brooklyn (1999), but *not* Canberra (1999).<sup>39</sup>

In a similar vein to the Whitney’s *Object Art*, in Australia, the *Body* exhibition (1997) at Sydney’s Art Gallery of New South Wales, curated by Tony Bond, enlisted historical works (François Sallé, Edgar Degas, Ana Mendieta, and Hans Bellmer) alongside contemporary works such as Doris Salcedo’s *Atrabiliarios* (1992–97) and Marc Quinn’s *Self* (1991). The catalogue included an essay by Bennett, who proposed that ‘The violent and the pornographic act upon the sensory body before it has a chance to process information, to “read” the image’, operating as a ‘language of the body’.<sup>40</sup> This ‘untranslatable idiolect’,<sup>41</sup> she argued, is ‘not so much semiotic’; rather, ‘the image [is], in a very palpable sense, “felt” rather than merely observed’.<sup>42</sup> At that time, Bennett’s route to thinking through this asignifying language was very much influenced by Gilles Deleuze,<sup>43</sup> as well as by a medieval notion of the ‘grotesque body’ in the particular way it was understood in Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*<sup>44</sup>—as a body that ‘can only be sensed’.<sup>45</sup> Four years after *Body*, the Art Gallery of New South Wales hosted the *Conducting Bodies: Affect, Sensation & Memory* conference, suggesting that theories of affect had become more clearly defined within art theory. Keynote speakers included Ernst van Alphen and Geoffrey Batchen, and sessions titled ‘Theories of Affect’, ‘Affect and Abstraction’, and ‘Global Politics and Bodily Memory’ were chaired by Bond, Bennett and Sue Best, who has since become a prominent figure in art theory around affect. A special issue of this very journal, on ‘Affect and Sensation’, resulted.<sup>46</sup> *Conducting Bodies* was held from 20 to 22 July 2001, just seven weeks before 11 September 2001.

9/11 delivered an unforeseen validation to many of those ideas and precipitated a strong sense of urgency and timeliness that was largely absent in existing discussions around the memorialising of the Holocaust. As Grusin suggests, ‘The affective turn helps explain the embodied individual and collective social and mediological response to 9/11.’<sup>47</sup> According to Clough’s 2007 account of the broader affective turn, the events of 9/11 sparked an immediate sense of urgency to consider affect in this new context:<sup>48</sup> ‘The increasing significance of affect as a focus of analysis across a number of disciplinary and interdisciplinary discourses is occurring at a time when critical theory is facing the analytic challenges of ongoing war, trauma, torture, massacre, and counter/terrorism.’<sup>49</sup>

Particularly influential for art theorists, as well as for the humanities at large, was Cathy Caruth’s 1996 monograph *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, ‘a short, elegant book, which’, according to Wulf Kansteiner in 2004, ‘has become influential across the humanities’.<sup>50</sup> Much of the humanities theory on affect and trauma following 9/11 transmitted Caruth’s very particular characterisation of trauma; such works include Karyn Ball’s *Traumatizing Theory: The Cultural Politics of Affect in and Beyond Psychoanalysis*,<sup>51</sup>

Judith Greenberg's *Trauma at Home: After 9/11*,<sup>52</sup> Ulrich Baer's *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*,<sup>53</sup> and Roger Luckhurst's *The Trauma Question*, which noted in 2008 that Caruth was 'one of the central figures who helped foster the boom in cultural trauma theory in the early 1990s'.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, there is a still-expanding body of literature that continues this 'Caruthian tradition in trauma studies', as Griselda Pollock describes it.<sup>55</sup> To characterise the very particular 'Caruthian' tradition and highlight some of the key limitations that the affect–trauma paradigm has inherited from it, it is essential here to understand some of Caruth's central tenets and some responses to them.

### **'The Caruthian Tradition in Trauma Studies'**

Perhaps the single most seminal text for the post-9/11 affect–trauma paradigm was Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Central to Caruth's theory is the notion of trauma as 'an experience that is not fully assimilated as it occurs'.<sup>56</sup> She says, 'trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on'.<sup>57</sup> The traumatic event 'resists simple comprehension'.<sup>58</sup> Caruth's characterisation of trauma is very particular—*adapting* a 'dissociative' model of thinking about trauma that originates with Sigmund Freud.<sup>59</sup> In the example of a train accident, trauma 'does not simply represent the violence of a collision but also conveys the impact of its very incomprehensibility. What returns to haunt the victim ... is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known.'<sup>60</sup> Indeed, others such as van Alphen, influenced by Caruth's thinking, go further to argue that the originary point of the trauma *cannot even be experienced*, and thus is absolutely inassimilable.<sup>61</sup> This inassimilable 'unclaimed' experience is thus incomprehensible to the traumatised subject and, following a period of latency, belatedly returns with a symptomatic vengeance that Freud terms *Nachträglichkeit*,<sup>62</sup> which is, literally, an 'aftershock'.<sup>63</sup>

This Freudian formulation of trauma evolves into the specifically Caruthian tradition in the particular adaptation of Freud's dissociative understandings of individual psychical trauma into the cultural realms of the humanities. Indeed, Kansteiner criticises Caruth for her 'selective reading of Freud' and for cherry-picking those parts of Freud's diverse body of work that support the dissociative model of trauma<sup>64</sup> for the purpose of ultimately constructing an overarching argument about history: 'that our knowledge of history is the result of a belated failure of representation'.<sup>65</sup> To that end, throughout *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth weaves an elegantly complex tapestry of historical, biographical, archetypal, and theological strands into her thesis, in ways that almost make the conflation of the personal and the historical appear natural, even inevitable. She argues that Freud's earlier formulations on trauma become embedded in an historical trauma of the murder and return of Moses in the establishment of monotheism in Judaism, describing 'Freud's central insight, in *Moses and Monotheism*, that history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas'.<sup>66</sup> Caruth imbricates Freud's

dissociative model, explicated (she argues) in *Moses and Monotheism*, with his discussion of the murder—and *return*—of the historical figure of Moses; in turn, she identifies Moses as a primal father archetype and layers Freud's processes of writing *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism* onto their contemporaneous historical traumatic events (the First World War and Second World War, respectively).<sup>67</sup> And thus within her dissociative formulation of trauma, history itself becomes 'a history of trauma', since it is not fully perceived as it occurs:<sup>68</sup> 'a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence'.<sup>69</sup> History cannot be immediately understood, and events in their moment are incomprehensible, according to her logic, yet they later return and emerge as *history*, replicating an individualised dissociative model of trauma.<sup>70</sup>

This extrapolation of individual dissociative trauma into an understanding of cultural trauma then becomes replicated in 'Caruthian' readings of cultural trauma. Pollock, for instance, makes the distinction between 'structural trauma' that occurs to individuals and 'historical trauma', of 'exile, torture, accidents, political terror',<sup>71</sup> only to assert that the division is actually unsustainable. She argues that a traumatic historical event *becomes* traumatising because, just as with an individual trauma, it inherits the structurally predisposed character of a common ancestor 'originary trauma',<sup>72</sup> which she finds, following Caruth, in Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*. Pollock's argument is suggestive of a mythical or platonic ideal of trauma—which is repeated throughout Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* as a trope of 'departure and return' after which all trauma is replicated—the form of which is most clearly manifest in the biblical narrative of Moses. In turn, the Caruthian formulation of trauma has, Ann Rothe says, 'become paradigmatic in trauma studies scholarship'.<sup>73</sup> For example, two chapters of Clough's 2007 *The Affective Turn* open with indented quotes from *Unclaimed Experience*,<sup>74</sup> and in Yochai Ataria et al.'s 2016 *Interdisciplinary Handbook of Trauma and Culture*, Caruth is cited and mentioned some 105 times.<sup>75</sup> Across the humanities, the field of trauma studies expanded rapidly after 9/11, to the extent that Neil J. Smelser observed in 2004 that 'the study of trauma is by now an industry and its literature is mountainous'.<sup>76</sup> Lucy Bond noted in 2011 that the field of trauma was 'a remarkably diverse area of research that extends, in different forms, across a wide number of disciplines (cultural studies, literary studies, psychology, neurobiology, sociology, and media and film studies, to name just a few)'.<sup>77</sup> Through this post-9/11 explosion of scholarship on trauma and affect in the humanities, the very particular Caruthian formulation becomes transmitted, replicated, and mutated, by and large maintaining its characteristic dissociative understanding of trauma and its conflation of the psychological and the cultural.

### **The Affect–Trauma Paradigm in Australian Art Theory**

Within art theory on affect in Australia's post-9/11 context, the Caruthian collapsing of the psychological and the cultural plays through in a seemingly irresolvable conundrum of how exactly personal traumatic or affective experience is intersubjectively transacted. One of the most important works at that moment, Bennett's 2005 *Empathic Vision*, replicates the Caruthian dissociative model of trauma: 'Traumatic or extreme affective experience, however, resists such processing.'<sup>78</sup> Bennett also quotes Caruth at length on the

‘unassimilated nature’ of trauma and its ‘return to haunt the survivor later on’,<sup>79</sup> and she similarly conflates the psychological and the cultural, understanding the ‘contagion’ of affect as operating as ‘a *political* rather than a *subjective* phenomenon’.<sup>80</sup> Bennett’s analyses of particular contemporary artworks attempt to unravel the intersubjective processes across a body politic through the subjective mechanisms of sense memory and the capacity of images to induce an ‘unwilled empathy’.<sup>81</sup> At the core of *Empathic Vision* is ‘the body’s propensity to analogical identification, the identification of a space of the body’, and the extent to which this can be extended intersubjectively, shared across a body politic.<sup>82</sup>

A key moment in thinking this through is Bennett’s discussion of the ‘squirm’. She discusses a condition of her student, Sarah Chesterman, who has no surface skin sensation on ninety per cent of her body. According to Bennett’s account, because Chesterman cannot feel her skin she has to actively visually interpret any contact with her skin: ‘You need to feel to see images, she said, and in particular you need to feel to know that what is visibly occurring before you is not actually happening to your body.’<sup>83</sup> So, ‘if she burns her leg’, Bennett explains, ‘her brain only knows by seeing the skin damage’.<sup>84</sup> A surprising effect of this is that she finds it difficult to watch horror movies because she feels what she sees deeply and more invasively than others. Bennett quotes Chesterman: ‘When people watch films they squirm. I think that the physical act of squirming is one of feeling one’s own body, it is an act of distancing the sensual experience being depicted—a way of feeling your own body and sending messages to the brain.’<sup>85</sup> So, the squirm is a way of feeling our own skin pull back from an uncomfortable over-identification with the image of what is happening to someone else; or, as Bennett puts it, ‘The squirm lets us feel the image, but also maintain a tension between self and image.’<sup>86</sup> It is a brilliant formulation that opens up an understanding of the intersection of the sensory body, empathy, and the image. It comes close to reconciling the transactional gap of individual trauma across subjective boundaries; however, it is a difficult model of understanding to maintain once the experience to be transacted becomes more complex, qualitative, and subjective.

For example, in her analysis of Willie Doherty’s *The Only Good One Is a Dead One* (1993), Bennett evokes an intersubjective ‘shock of recognition’ that can arise from empathic identification,<sup>87</sup> then extends this into ‘the inhabitation of space—of a political place’, which ‘is seen to give rise to specific psychological effects’.<sup>88</sup> In particular, Bennett’s extensive analysis of Doherty’s work attributes its affective charge to its film noir iconography,<sup>89</sup> combined with a more embodied sense of confinement engendered by its looped time.<sup>90</sup> Insofar as the work generates an affective encounter, this issues primarily from a cinematic narratological identification with the point of view and voiceover in Doherty’s videos. At best, the work becomes a mirror onto which we project our own experience and then imaginatively extrapolate into a political arena; however, the exact subjectivities in its intersubjective transactions remain fugitive. Similarly, in her analysis of the work of Doris Salcedo, Bennett notes that it ‘does not, of course, enable us to *live out* traumatic experience in an extended sense, but it is concerned to actively engender the possibility of an empathic encounter, where the graphic trauma image might leave us high and dry’.<sup>91</sup> Of course, what is transacted cannot be Salcedo’s specific ‘experience of traumatic memory and grief’.<sup>92</sup> Rather,



the most that these works can offer is the possibility of empathy for a receptive audience, who are as likely to misread the intentions of the work as they are to approximate an understanding.

Similarly to Bennett, and much more recently, art theorist Susan Best has grappled with the question of the exact nature of the intersubjective transaction—that is, what is exchanged—in an affective encounter with an artwork, and between whom it is exchanged. Best analyses Anne Ferran's *Lost to Worlds* (2008), a series of photographic images of former sites of incarceration and forced labour of Australian convict women in the nineteenth century. Ferran's photographs mostly capture the erasure of the sites, so that what is conveyed within their photographic iconography is little more than unreadable traces in seemingly empty physical spaces. In many of the works, Ferran has framed the image so that it is looking down onto areas of grass, with the horizon often located beyond the frame; and, importantly, these images do not picture anything that indicates what is historically significant about the sites.<sup>93</sup> These sites of trauma are 'now reduced to suggestive scars on the landscape: soft indentations, mounds, bare patches and stones'.<sup>94</sup> Best's analysis asks what affects can be instilled by these works and, citing their downcast perspective and the ground's disorienting undulations, suggests 'mixed emotions perhaps: retreat/shrinking away/shame and advance/resistance to shame/maybe even pride'.<sup>95</sup> That is, her analysis considers the gestural grammar behind the downcast and upturned gazes of the photographs, which are assumed to belong to the subjective point of view of Ferran. Best then introduces questions raised by Thierry de Duve in an interview with Ferran; de Duve reads the images as gesturally enacting Ferran's own shame. Ferran responds, acknowledging that to be the case, but also adds that this is mitigated by her identification with the victims, not the perpetrators, imaginatively siding with them, to which de Duve points out that, sociologically, Ferran is on the side of the perpetrators.<sup>96</sup>

The exchange draws attention to a recurrent feature of art theory in the affect–trauma paradigm: the complex and ultimately indeterminate identifications and relationships often involved in analysing any affective engagement that might occur with an artwork. Are we, the audience, empathically identifying with Ferran through a point of view, which (we have argued elsewhere) is no guarantee of identification? With whom does Ferran identify—imaginatively, sociologically, politically, gesturally? And, ultimately, what is transacted through the artwork? Best's analysis concludes, 'We cannot bear witness to this past in the usual sense of finally knowing things that were concealed or comprehending things that no one ever wanted to know about, but on the other hand we are engaged by the quest for that history which must, at least visually, elude us.'<sup>97</sup> So, in a similar approach to Bennett's analysis of Salcedo's work, while the work has the possibility of actively engendering empathic identification through imagined shared perspectives, it does not enable us to *live out* any specific interpersonal traumatic experience.<sup>98</sup> And, logically, neither should we expect it to; but the Caruthian conflation of the psychological and the cultural is so infused throughout the affect–trauma paradigm that it seems that affective transaction *should* be possible. The proving and understanding of a rich affective transaction acts as a holy grail for art theorists. In her opening pages, Bennett states that trauma-related art 'often touches us, but it does not

necessarily communicate the “secret” of personal experience’;<sup>99</sup> yet *Empathic Vision* chases that possibility. Of course, there are significant philosophical differences between the lineages of Bennett’s and Best’s theorising of affect: Bennett’s belongs to a Deleuzian branch developed by theorists such as Moira Gatens<sup>100</sup> and Brian Massumi,<sup>101</sup> which informs the work of Anthony McCosker,<sup>102</sup> Stef Craps,<sup>103</sup> Karyn Ball,<sup>104</sup> Griselda Pollock, and Ernst van Alphen, while Best’s originates in the work of American psychologist Silvan Tomkins, interpreted via Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Paul Ekman, and Donald Nathanson,<sup>105</sup> which informs the work of Anna Gibbs and Elspeth Probyn.<sup>106</sup> However, the intersubjectivity conundrum is similar.

The potentially problematic consequences of the Caruthian approach have been comprehensively addressed across different disciplines following that immediate post-9/11 formation of the affect–trauma paradigm, by Ruth Leys (most notably and sustained)<sup>107</sup> as well as E. Ann Kaplan,<sup>108</sup> Roger Luckhurst,<sup>109</sup> Wulf Kansteiner,<sup>110</sup> and Lucy Bond.<sup>111</sup> Kansteiner is particularly scathing of ‘Caruth’s world of “trauma light”’.<sup>112</sup> He contends that ‘the trendy celebrations of trauma’<sup>113</sup> in the humanities combine incommensurable models of conceptualising trauma: ‘psychotherapeutic theory and practice’ versus the ‘conceptual ambition of speculative philosophy’.<sup>114</sup> Similarly, Traverso and Broderick note in the field of media theory that ‘the methodological distinction between this term’s original psychological denotation and its analogical use in relation to the socio-cultural realm is often ambiguous if not altogether obscure’.<sup>115</sup> In sociology, Jeffrey C. Alexander et al.’s 2004 anthology *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* characterises cultural trauma in ways that are similar to characterisations of individual trauma, as leaving ‘indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways’.<sup>116</sup> However, the authors explicitly reject the Caruthian approach, dismissing it as ‘the psychoanalytic version of lay trauma theory’.<sup>117</sup> As sociologists, they are keen to not blindly apply the psychoanalytic model to a body politic,<sup>118</sup> and, rather, consider the ways in which the character of cultural trauma importantly diverges from Caruth’s model, drawing instead upon the much earlier work of Kai Erikson on collective versus individual trauma and their distinctly different manifestations (according to Erikson, ‘collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with “trauma”’<sup>119</sup>). As Kansteiner argues, humanities theorists make full use of studies in psychology as though they inform this metaphor in cultural theory, ignoring the fact that much humanities trauma theory combines two independent traditions of research.<sup>120</sup>

Indeed, conceptually cleaving cultural trauma from psychological trauma, Smelser argues that ‘No discrete historical event or situation automatically or necessarily qualifies in itself as a cultural trauma.’<sup>121</sup> In other words, whereas according to a dissociative understanding of personal psychological trauma an event that holds significance of which I am not yet aware will leave me ripe for traumatic return later, cultural trauma is a conscious, deliberative and consensus-derived process. This does not mean that a society experiencing cultural trauma does not include individuals suffering from psychological trauma, which has cultural, social, and political dimensions—indeed, collective cultural trauma and individual psychological

trauma can arise from the same event—rather, it means that cultural trauma arises from a set of social processes quite apart from psychological trauma. As Allan Meek says, ‘cultural trauma implies not that everyone in a society had the same experience but that certain events have been given extraordinary status for a society’.<sup>122</sup> Smelser likewise argues that whether or not an event is a cultural trauma is contingent on the sociocultural context at the time of the event and that cultural traumas are ‘historically made, not born’.<sup>123</sup> Consequently, ‘cultural trauma differs greatly from a psychological trauma in terms of the mechanisms that establish and sustain it’, argues Smelser; ‘The mechanisms associated with psychological trauma are the intrapsychic dynamics of defense, adaptation, coping, and working through; the mechanisms at the cultural level are mainly those of social agents and contending groups.’<sup>124</sup> Importantly, cultural traumas are contested social processes: whether an event was, indeed, traumatic and to whom; how it is to be interpreted and ascribed meaning; and what feelings should properly arise from it.<sup>125</sup> In other words, regardless of any personal psychological trauma, cultural trauma stands for a symbolic act of naming, designating value to, and narrativising that event in the public sphere. And, Smelser argues, the outcomes of cultural trauma are quite different from Freud’s individualised idea of ‘grief work’; cultural traumas do not resolve in a ‘cure’ that neutralises the shock, but, rather, in ‘constant, recurrent struggle ... flarings-up when new constellations of new social forces and agents stir up the troubling memory again’.<sup>126</sup> Similarly, Friedländer argues that while individual trauma is characterised by its lack of resolution and eventual fading, collective trauma ‘is mostly integrated into a wider, coherent narrative and thus transformed from a negative and incomprehensible occurrence into a positive and empowering mandate for the community’.<sup>127</sup> Cultural trauma is thus produced across the body politic, expressed specifically in the social realm, mediated and ‘composed of images and narratives’.<sup>128</sup> As a social process, it is *political* rather than *psychological*.

## **Conclusion**

The affect–trauma paradigm in the humanities is historically situated, emerging in the 1990s from a creative interpretation of psychology and then flourishing in response to 9/11 and its ensuing images of war, terror, conflict, and political violence. As such, we should not assume its models were somehow coincidentally uncovered at exactly the time that they were needed. Rather, twenty or so years ago, the humanities—including art theory—felt the distinct lack of a language to consider intense, emotive visual phenomena. Theory in the humanities is fundamentally speculative, interpretive, and generative; our disciplines are not the sciences, and we are at liberty to seek out and adopt from other epistemological models and to generate languages that allow visual phenomena to be understood and discussed. Semiotics, once looted from linguistics, was no longer fit to meet the demand, as identified by Massumi, for a ‘cultural-theoretical vocabulary specific to affect’ and ‘an asignifying philosophy of affect’.<sup>129</sup> So, our disciplines plundered old theoretical models from elsewhere. The early interpreters of these theories adapted and mutated very particular and selective interpretations of affect and trauma, translating across disciplinary lines from psychology, where they were already crossing epistemological boundaries in the late 1990s. When 9/11 accelerated the

development of humanities affect and trauma theory, the peculiarities within the early interpretations were absorbed and became mutated to form the very DNA of its orthodoxies.

We now find ourselves one generation since 9/11 and two decades further along the discourses it activated. From the vantage point of 2019, affect and trauma theory appears quite different from the speculative and creative solutions to the conceptual exhaustion of semiotics in the late 1990s. Twenty-five years later, we have avoided the return of the real only to now be in danger of seeing everything through the filter of affect and trauma. As the post-9/11 moment, from 2001 to 2008, came to a close, Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman tried to make sense of this new ‘empire of trauma’.<sup>130</sup> They also noted the fluidity of the use of the word ‘trauma’ from its psychiatric meaning, that is, from ‘(a psychological shock) to its metaphorical extension disseminated by the media (a tragic event)’.<sup>131</sup> But for Fassin and Rechtman, the slipperiness of the term suggests something more widespread than a mere adoption of Caruth’s approach across the humanities; rather, in the post-9/11 world, ‘the idea of trauma is thus becoming established as a commonplace of the contemporary world, a shared truth’.<sup>132</sup> They argue that the conflation came about as a consequence of campaigning in the 1990s by victims’ organisations for official recognition of trauma, drawing on psychiatric and psychological ideas and consequently ‘de-psychiatrizing’ the language of trauma.<sup>133</sup> Prior to that, ideas around trauma were ‘rarely evoked outside of the closed circles of psychiatry and psychology’.<sup>134</sup> In fact, they argue, not only has trauma become embedded in everyday usage, but it has, ‘in fact, created a new language of the event’.<sup>135</sup>

While the field was afire with speculative and generative thinking in the post-9/11 years, some of its most productive moments have occurred when its orthodoxies have been allowed to loosen. Following *Empathic Vision*, Bennett developed her ‘practical aesthetics’ approach, ideas around intermediality, and ‘visual culture studies’ by abandoning the intractable task of resolving the Caruthian enfolding of the psychological and the political. In 2007, she wrote, ‘realized as the intersection of different practices, technologies, languages and sign systems, intermediality posits a broad transdisciplinary sphere of operation, open to—but not restricted to—interventions in aesthetic form’.<sup>136</sup> *Practical Aesthetics*, in turn, actively attempts to open up (rather than define) the ‘intermediality’ of the field of visual culture, as one that recognises expression and thought across a vast range of imagery, while maintaining contemporary art’s sense of active interventionism.<sup>137</sup> For Bennett, political agency is the point of contemporary art. And in terms of the event, a vital distinction exists between the media and art: ‘Whereas media assumes the function of witnessing and documenting what actually happens ... art (the critical self-conscious manipulation of media) has the capacity to explore the nature of the event’s perception and hence to participate in its social and political configuration.’<sup>138</sup> Bennett’s point here—about both the event and the role of art and visual culture—is very close to our approach in our ongoing research.

As Leys asserts, ‘cultural theorists who have turned to affect are interested only in the effects that media and other representations have on the viewer, thereby converting questions about the meaning of artistic works into questions concerning their traumatic-affective influence on the subject.’<sup>139</sup> Indeed, much of the more recent literature of the affect–trauma paradigm

focuses on refining its formulations and debating the instruments while neglecting the object of study. We may well doubt the efficacy of the affect–trauma paradigm in helping us understand meaning in art. We should be clear here: we are not rejecting the importance of the affect–trauma paradigm in current humanities and art theory studies around images of war. Rather, we recognise the importance of this vast body of theoretical work. We acknowledge its limitations, however, and seek to think about contemporary images of war, terror, and conflict today in ways that untether them from an all-encompassing affect–trauma paradigm. In its popularised cultural forms, whether these be Ben Quilty’s portraits of soldiers suffering PTSD or Hannah Gadsby’s *Nanette* Netflix stand-up special, the affect–trauma paradigm as a creative, artistic, cultural trope has well and truly entered the mainstream. Yet, as Rex Butler’s recent article on Quilty’s *After Afghanistan* paintings argues, ‘on the one hand, commentators claim that they offer a real insight into soldiers’ lives, as though through Quilty’s work we might get to know them, their individual lives and struggles’; however, while art about trauma may convey the expressive signs of empathy, it tells us nothing of the actual experience of those soldiers.<sup>140</sup> That is, art in the affect–trauma register will, at most, only ever convey affect and emotional intensity, but never the nature of the trauma itself. The point here is not that we wish to see more *and more* intense emotionality, increasingly affecting images, clearer empathic connections, and a greater ‘authentic’ sense of trauma and pain that raises the ante on affective intensity. These would seem to lead to what Sasha Grishin laments in his review of the 2019 *Quilty* retrospective: ‘The “en masse” emotional pitch of Quilty’s exhibition, after a while, loses its ability to shock’, adding that ‘the works scream at you from the walls, proclaiming ... urgency, passion and raw emotion.’<sup>141</sup> Moreover, trauma and affect are central to the ‘ideology of our times’, as Butler alludes.<sup>142</sup> As our forthcoming work will argue, we live in times when triggering, feeling, trauma, emotion, and affect operate at the very core of the visual ways in which our world does politics, spreads terror, and fights wars. Eighteen years—one generation—after 9/11, we exist in a post-Trump-2016 world, in which affect politics has the world now deadlocked in feverish exaltations of trauma and emotions, while Enlightenment values of reason and objectivity wither. It is time for contemporary art and art theory to find different ways of doing politics.

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<sup>2</sup> Ruth Leys, ‘The Turn to Affect: A Critique’, *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 434.

<sup>3</sup> Antonio Traverso and Mick Broderick, ‘Interrogating Trauma: Towards a Critical Trauma Studies’, *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 24, no. 1 (2010): 7.

<sup>4</sup> Ernst van Alphen, ‘Toys and Affect: Identifying with the Perpetrator in Contemporary Holocaust Art’, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 3, no. 1, ‘Affect and Sensation’ (2002): 158–90; Ernst van Alphen, ‘Caught by Images: On the Role of Visual Imprints in Holocaust Testimonies’, *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (2002): 205–21; Ernst van Alphen, ‘Playing the Holocaust’, in *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art*, ed. Norman L. Kleeblatt (New York & New Brunswick: The Jewish Museum New York & Rutgers University Press, 2002), 65–84.

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