

From the G(k)not Movie Video: Who is the real enemy?

Language and the images we co-create.¹

3/1/15

What about the consequences? With Open Walls Baltimore in mind I tell this story in an effort to generate awareness of the possible consequences of powerful images for viewers like me and to ask the question: What is the responsibility of an artist when doing public art?²

At the end of the conversation after last night's screening I was called a "conservative" because I want to "censor" what art should be allowed on public walls, particularly walls surrounding public schools.

I have been a certified clinical social worker for more than 30 years. I remember, when working with traumatized children in the 1980s –1990s that many clients would seem to disappear or change their state of being right before my eyes without a moment notice. This observation generated my research about diagnosing and treating traumatized children. My work on a phd. in human relations and cybernetics was heavily influenced by the amount and degree of trauma I saw when working with the inner city children of Baltimore. It was also during this time I got involved in a study group of child therapists, at Sheppard Pratt Hospital, who were experiencing similar situations with their clients. Kids were disappearing before our very eyes. They appeared to transform themselves into another world where language and interaction as we know it did not exist. We were all looking for explanations, and the phenomena known as "dissociation" became a fundamental element for describing their "altered states."

Dissociation, a psychological phenomenon that entails "disconnecting" from one's current niche or present circumstance, is often characterized as a continuum process. At one end of the continuum is daydreaming and at the other end fugue states or amnesia. A common phrase to describe dissociation is "altered states of consciousness." Many consider dissociation a *natural response* to *severe* stress and/or pain, commonly referred to as trauma. It seems our biology not only shapes our living but that our living shapes our biology, our thinking and doing. Trauma reshapes one's biological makeup according to one's experience... this is how nature protects us. -- Meagan Gunnar, Ph.D.³

It's nature's way.⁴

When I was in Europe in 1991 doing research I found myself in Amsterdam in the hottest lesbian bar on the planet. What I most remember, besides all the beautiful people and running into someone I knew from Baltimore, is that while I was dancing my kneecap popped out. I went down unable to get up. The pain was so unbearable that in order to survive I observed myself *automatically* dissociating so that I could straighten my leg so that my kneecap could go back into its proper place. I don't know how I could have done it otherwise. It was nature's way....

¹ Video "[Who is the real enemy?](#)" excerpt Gentrification (k)NOT the power of Images Bloomberg Newsweek report.

² What are the possible subliminal consequences for a viewer of images in public spaces?

³ Meagan Gunnar, a developmental psychologist at the University of Minnesota research on Childhood Responses to Stressful Experiences. [NPR March 3, 2015](#).

⁴ When experiencing trauma one's body, (organism), mind (organism + environment) and psychic space, (all that this entails that we see and do not see), automatically reorganizes itself in ways that allow one to survive that moment. This in turn orients one's adaption (assimilation or accommodation) in accordance with a present state of being from moment to moment to moment (one's epigenesis -- we all have one and no two are alike).

In my experience, professionally and personally, dissociation is a dynamic that naturally occurs when experiencing severe pain or trauma. We all do it naturally. It is a matter of degree, the more pain or trauma the more dissociation. How often and how much is associated with how often and to what degree we have experienced severe pain or trauma and without release = treatment, and the consequences of trauma remains an element of who we are -- now -- until we deal with it.⁵

The Biology of Love – One Condition of Being Human

When love is interfered with we become ill and we are cured through love. Love in this context is not a sentiment. It is the legitimization of the other in coexistence with oneself. This is so fundamental that sooner or later we fall into this or we disappear. -- Humberto Maturana, phd.⁶

It is estimated that approximately 25% of US children will experience some sort of trauma before the age of 16.⁷ As a social worker working with traumatized children in poor urban neighborhoods I suggest the percentage of children experiencing trauma in Baltimore City – without treatment is *much higher* than 25%.

If you care read on.

What happens when caring too much? I ask this question since sometimes my caring gets in the way of my performing daily life.

Traumatic experiences related to neglect, abuse and other types of severe stress and/or pain -- when left to fester – can provoke someone to over-or-under react in certain situations, particularly when you are young. What might those situations be?

The dynamic reception of images

Premise: We are all observers and no two of us observe exactly the same. Not even identical twins. Our observing is person specific and biologically determined in accordance with the context in which we live.

I know from experience that images can trigger someone in uncertain ways -- particularly if that someone has experienced trauma and has a tendency to dissociate.

It's 2003 I'm back in Europe. I've been invited to present my video of Ernst von Glasersfeld at an international conference.⁸ It's different time zone, different environment, no sleep, lots of coffee, and lots of circular thinking. All goes well. Until. I'm going to a workshop located in the [Wittgenstein-Haus in Vienna](#). In order to get there I must walk through a gallery full of images of what I call "dark art," including images of disconnected body parts, a huge nail going through a foot and a variety of surrealistic-like images. I don't know how to explain [dark art](#) other than to say I know it when I see it. Once in the lecture space I find myself disoriented – dissociating – unable to concentrate, I feel vulnerable. I cannot stay in the room. I leave and ask myself "what the hell is this?" I decide it's the art. It triggered me.

Considering the images and my current state of being: tired, stress-out, in a foreign land, dissociation was my best option. I am sensitive to my experiences of being triggered and when observing-my-observing and reflecting I am better able to understand my situation. I am aware of the all-too-often subliminal

⁵ When one experiences trauma without treatment they are likely to develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

⁶ [Video](#) "Biology of Love." Humberto Maturana at the American Society for Cybernetics (ASC), 1992. Washington.

⁷ <http://www.nctsn.org/resources/audiences/school-personnel/trauma-toolkit>

⁸ Video "Heinz von Foerster's Imperatives and Contributions to Science and Cybernetics." ASC 2003. Vienna.

consequences for some viewers when perceiving certain types of images. It's a matter of one's epigenesis – no two are identical. It depends on one's genetic makeup and all one experiences until – now.

So Public art

Some of us are more prone to dissociate than others. It depends on how each of us, as observers/perceivers and viewers of art and life experience an instant with or without a history or herstory of trauma -- particularly untreated trauma.⁹

Images of a variety of types depending on the viewer, orient, evoke, provoke and/or trigger people different ways in different circumstances. So, when is there a healthy relationship between a viewer of images, public art, and the responsibility of an artist?

When I choose to go -- or not go -- to a museum or gallery anything goes. When it is Public art, located in a neighborhood for all of us to see and experience without consent I claim anything *cannot* go. People who have experienced untreated trauma are more likely to dissociate when viewing images that generate discomfort. How I perceive an image depends on MY epigenesis NOT yours -- or yours -- MINE. Once triggered a perceiver's actions may change abruptly in accordance with his or her survival techniques. Others might not understand. Situations can escalate into actions that are problematic for the participants involve.



Some say with awareness comes responsibility. I'm a kid, I live in a poor urban neighborhood, and I have experienced untreated trauma in my living at home, in the neighborhood, or at school. I walk down my street, or out of my school door, which image might help me feel more comfortable?

Now that you have some idea as to the possible consequences of Public art and the power of images on those of us who have no choice but to experience it according to our history or herstory of living -- I ask, what are your Intentions?

Judith Lombardi, lcsw-c, phd
Filmmaker

[Gentrification \(k\)NOT Project](#)

⁹ It's amazing what a human organism can-and-will-do in order to maintain and create equilibrium (autopoiesis) so that living (structural coupling) might continue. Our humanness entails a niche of constraints and possibilities at every instant of our living. It's all interconnected and there are boundaries ([structural determined systems theory](#)).