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Chapter 4 - Rupture

The previous chapter explored the shift from presence to absence in art and it was argued that the contemporary art experience and its transitional space, is characterized by the state of absence. It is absence, or in other words, the space opened up by some contemporary art, that enables the observer to come up with non-teleological associations and encounter (inner) experiences that might not have been thought of or known about before. The question to consider now is what exactly is this special force in contemporary art that opens up the space of absence for non-teleological associations? In this chapter, I will explore the force that might be understood as the cradle of absence, and therefore a possible condition for the ‘ground zero’ of art.

4.1 Outline

I argue that the force of contemporary art which is responsible for opening space for absence can be understood as rupture. Some contemporary artworks might be seen as a ‘cut’ into the body of the social order, as explained in the previous chapter, overcoming the power-structure that binds the subject; therefore possibly opening space for other alternative ways of being in the world. It must be noted that although many contemporary artworks have the ability to create ‘a tear’, not all types of rift open up transitional space, or in other words, evoke emptiness with potentials. There are artworks that interrogate certain psychological or social frameworks, yet they stay within the (hegemonic) structure they aim to overcome. Therefore, the rupture that I am looking for is a special effect of some particular works; it is an act of cutting that pierces right to the core of how we are in the world, demanding profound revaluation. It is a force unique to certain contemporary artworks and this chapter is an exploration of this act. I refer to this special form of ‘cut’, as ‘rupture’.

Firstly, I will introduce how, I think rupture differs from other forms of tear induced by contemporary art. Subsequently, I explore what ‘tear’or ‘cut’ in art might represent in
general. In connection with this argument, I will introduce the idea of shock, and explore the concept of the ‘contradictory image’ as a factor possibly responsible for rupture. Given that the most extreme form of shock is trauma, a comparison between the force of art as rupture and the nature of trauma is discussed with the intention of getting closer to the nature of rupture. The argument is narrowed down by introducing the ideas of Rancière which in turn leads to the idea that rupture might be able to change our usual frame of references. How might rupture do this, and ‘what is it that is torn into?’ In order to explain, I will then describe a certain psychoanalytic theory, a Lacan-ian viewpoint of the psyche. Finally, I will outline rupture with its unique impact on the psyche, as well as the possible potentials for rupture in contemporary art.

4.2 The nature of rupture

My reason for trying to grasp what rupture might represent and why it is important to articulate lies in the idea that rupture is a unique force within the art engagement. I argue that rupture might be seen as an experience through which one could arrive at a state of ‘ground zero’; an empty, yet very potent space. From this perspective, undergoing rupture might be seen as a gateway to the experience of ‘ground zero’; it might be the condition for such a state to emerge and this is where its importance lies.

Rupture can be seen as a ‘tear’ inflicted in the social and individual ‘body’ of the self; there is a shattering of frames of reference and taken-for-granted structures. However, it is clear that the kind of rupture I am looking for is not simply any kind of ‘cut’. Rupture as an act is a (non)state, a timeless moment. Through rupture, one arrives at a stopping of time, into a space in which there is no time. At the moment of the ‘cut’, there could well be a falling apart, an interrogation of all that we have taken for granted. Rupture is not to be confused with ‘ground zero’ which I understand and use as a space of potentials, elaborated upon extensively in Chapter One. As I see it, rupture is a condition in which ‘ground zero’ can emerge. Rupture might be grasped most easily through a metaphor: Let us think of a long exhalation that takes us down to the core of being. At the moment after the exhalation and before the next breath there is a void, a complete negation in which anything could happen: there might or might not be an inhalation, therefore life. I argue that this moment might
occur in contemporary art and can be seen as the gateway for new alternatives to arise. It is conditioned by this incision (this exhalation) that is able to cut through our conceptual state of affairs.

Bearing all this in mind, the subsequent sub-chapters are dedicated to this quest for rupture. Starting from the effect of shock, and through exploring various forms of ‘the cut’ in art, non-art and art theory, I will explore whether contemporary art can indeed exercise this complete incision.

4.3 Shock versus rupture

As indicated previously, rupture is often associated with shock. The shock phenomenon in art is not a new invention. Art since the 1960s has used shock-value extensively. Performance and other pieces that show extreme sexuality, such as Carolee Schneemann’s *Interior scroll* (1975)\(^1\), Vitto Acconci’s *Seedbed* (1972)\(^2\) up to the \(\gamma\)Ba - pieces by Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin or the Chapman brothers, and the list could go on, actually live from shock-value and have become notorious examples of shocking art. Although the pieces mentioned belong to the 20\(^{th}\) century, one can look even further back in history to find shocking artworks. It might seem strange to introduce historical works in a contemporary art research. However, I do so for two reasons, firstly I sense that the specific ‘tear’ I am looking for, namely rupture, is not necessarily the specificity of contemporary art; it can also be found in images of the past. Secondly, the contrasting of the following historical examples demonstrates really well the tension between ‘shock versus rupture’\(^3\).

There are numerous examples in art history portraying people, usually of noble origin, with various disabilities. These images strike the (contemporary) observer as shocking

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\(^2\) Vito Acconci, *Seedbed* (1972). The artist lay under a ramp in the Sonnabend Gallery and voiced sexual fantasies while masturbating under the wooden construct.

\(^3\) I am also aware that through historical examples I suggest that some images are ‘transhistorical’, however it falls outside the domain of my research to explore this otherwise fascinating topic.
or disturbing, and most likely had the same effect of ‘curiosity’ back in their day. For instance, Diego Velazquez and Jusepe Ribera were known for painting midgets at the royal court; or the famous work by Lavinia Fontana of a woman with extensive facial and body hair, a condition known as hypertrichosis universalis (see fig. 22.) still makes the viewer stop in wonder. No matter if the artist aimed to portray this respected noblewoman as educated and honored in court, her physical appearance still remains disturbing and the main theme of the work.

Surely, art can hit us with its outrageous nature, but does it remain good or interesting a minute longer than the momentary effect of the shock? Not always. However, there are some artworks that can reach beyond the shock to the extent that although the disturbing image is ‘there’, it becomes a surface-narrative. Once over the shock, the viewer is invited beyond the image, beyond representation and one finds oneself in a space of

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4 It is important to note that I am writing from the viewpoint of the contemporary observer and I do not take the historical reception of the works into consideration as it would be a sidetrack.
ambiguity. Such is the case with the Jusepe Ribera's painting, *Magdalena Ventura with her husband and son* 1631 (fig. 23.), now displayed in the Prado.

This Spanish Baroque painting by Ribera, that also goes by the name *The bearded woman*, ‘jumps off’ the museum wall. We see a masculine-looking person who is actually a woman portrayed suckling an infant from an oddly placed breast, with the husband standing in the background. She is much too aged to be a young mother. The odd appearance of the figure is explained in the bottom-right corner of the painting; we find out that the 52 year-old Magdalena, mother of three, suffered from a physical condition that resulted in extensive facial hair-growth after she turned thirty-seven. Magdalene did not have hypertrichosis, she was most likely suffering from androblastoma that results in a change of the hormone system and a rise in the level of testosterone. Her appearance caught the
attention of the Duke of Alcalá who therefore commissioned a portrait of her. The Duke obviously took pleasure in looking at people with unusual physical features.\(^5\)

One is accustomed to seeing dwarfs, buffoons and people with unusual physical attributes, often treated as ‘freaks’ in the Baroque.\(^6\) After seeing a certain number of these paintings one gets used to them. Therefore, in the case of *The bearded woman* it is not the odd physical features of the woman that makes us return to the painting over and over again. In other words, it is not the represented that draws us back to the painting. Instead, the piece carries way too many contradictions that unsettle us. Why is she breastfeeding in spite of her age? Why is the breast so crudely painted? Why is she so elegantly dressed? Why is the husband hiding in the background? Her facial expression is haunting; the eager look, the sweat on the forehead, the tear in the eye. What is it that this image wants from us?

The image does not make a statement, as the Fontana piece does, instead it questions and *demands*. It does not let go of the viewer after a simple shock. One could argue that the Fontana piece presents a kind creature, indeed a noble person, who also happens to be extremely hairy. Fontana’s image is easy to read; a possible representational narrative would be that Fontana wanted to overcome the unfortunate physical features of the noble girl by presenting her as a virtuous spirit. However, this is not the case with the Ribera work. This piece cuts into our usual frame of references, we just cannot get hold of the image; it escapes interpretation. We see a ‘shemale’, who is aged, yet breastfeeding, with a husband who is less masculine than she is; in a sense she overcomes the dichotomy of feminine-masculine. She is beautifully dressed, yet there is tragedy in her eyes. She is positioned like a saint, yet she sweats and stands there as an object of study; one can argue that she is between or beyond the sacred and profane. Furthermore, we cannot decide whether *Magdalena* is an agent or an object.\(^7\) Put simply, we do not know what to do with the image. The image cuts into the our usual, taken-for-granted frames of reference and we stand in front of it, stupefied, not being able to let go of the work (I personally had to return to it again and again).

\(^{5}\) For further analysis see article on http://qjmed.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2011/01/19/qjmed.hcq254.full.
\(^{6}\) The Duke of Alcalá who commissioned this piece had several of such works in his collection.
\(^{7}\) Dualism explained in Chapter Two.
One can already sense that this latter shocking piece operates differently from the Fontana painting. From the viewpoint of rupture, how does this piece differ from other ‘shocking’ images? What is it that this Ribera painting ‘does’ that the Fontana piece cannot do? Or what is it that it is able to do that outrageous pieces by British artist, Tracey Emin, for instance, are also unable to evoke? After this short historical introduction to the concept of rupture, in which I aimed to demonstrate what type of experience I am looking for, and show that this ‘tear’ pointing beyond shock is not new to art, I will now return to contemporary art. Let me explore how current art theory understands concepts associated with rupture and whether they can be used to help us understand where the nature of rupture might lie.

4.4 Condition for rupture – the contradictory image

It was suggested that although rupture might be associated with shock, shock-value itself is not necessarily enough, or even analogous with rupture. Certain artworks can be shocking, yet they stop at a representational level, and one is not taken beyond the narrative that the piece aims to present; therefore rupture cannot effectively work.

In the following, I introduce a concept through which we might be able to get closer to the rupture created by contemporary art. If it is not shock, what is the factor that creates rupture? What are the characteristics in contemporary art that might bring about rupture? In order to get closer to rupture, I argue that some images carry contradiction within themselves. They are not necessarily outrageous, yet they evoke a momentary pause of thought, creating a tear in the beholder’s conceptual state of affairs. In her book *Art, architecture. A place between* (2006), architecture theorist Jane Rendell describes such images with the term ‘dialectical image’, first introduced by Walter Benjamin. Although Rendell is an architecture theorist, she also uses this concept to explore works of fine art. In the footsteps of Benjamin, Rendell argues that dialectical images carry simultaneously a thesis and an antithesis. Synthesis is actually the image itself. However, in a dialectical image, although there is a “resolving”, there is not a reconciliation of thesis and antithesis in the synthesis. Instead, a specific tension arises from the two or more conflicting elements put next to one another. I think of these images as contradictory, and in order to show the
tension these images contain, I am using this expression instead of ‘dialectical’. The contradictory elements are not compromised by one another, but they produce an uncomfortable strain that comes from the fact that these paradoxical parts have to coexist within the image. This tension within the image is difficult for our everyday logical, rationally built minds to digest, therefore we find these images shocking. Rendell uses the term ‘shock’ in a different way than it was used and applied previously. Such images “… create a moment when the usual patterns of thinking and everyday living stop and new ones are given a chance to emerge…” (Rendell 2006:78). Rendell believes dialectical images create stoppages in everyday thinking, which is a progressive way to experience art, as it is a gateway for new constellations. This kind of ‘shock’ could be analogous with the rupture I am looking for. Indeed, one can easily understand how Meret Oppenheim’s widely known Object (Le déjeuner en fourrure) (1936), for instance, drags one out of one’s conceptual state of affairs by functioning as a dialectical image in various ways; there is a tension between the cup used for serving tea and the imagined taste of the cup made of fur; there is the dichotomy of the object referring to an elitist get-together that becomes a reference to cavemen and prehistoric times; and most importantly there is the clashing of an object of use with that of status symbols (fur as reference to elegance and money) resulting in an object that – if used – evokes repulsion.

Such pieces really shake one’s existing conceptual state of affairs and this is what Dada succeeded in doing and what Conceptual Art enthusiastically rediscovered. In many ways, and from this perspective too, Dada can be seen as a predecessor to contemporary art. It is not surprising that we can discover the same tension within contemporary artworks. It is this ‘halt’ or ‘arresting of thoughts’ that we encounter.

Is the impact created by contradictory images the same as rupture? Is this ‘arrest of thoughts’ or ‘stoppage’, a complete experience of ‘cutting through’? As the example above demonstrates, the Object by Oppenheim does arrest us momentarily. But does it tear into our frame of references, bringing our conceptual state of affairs to a complete stop? I suggest that there is a difference. In order to make a distinction between the ‘stoppages’ of

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8 Meret Oppenheim’s Object (Le déjeuner en fourrure) (1936). Fur-covered cup, saucer, and spoon, Cup 10.9 cm in diameter; saucer 23.7 cm in diameter; spoon 20.2 cm long, overall height 7.3 cm. MOMA collection, NY,
contradictory image and what I mean by rupture, let me introduce two artworks and compare how they operate on us.

A central piece of the 2011 Venice Biennale was Urs Fischer’s gigantic wax sculpture *Untitled* (2011) (fig. 24., fig. 25.). Actually, three sculptures made up the piece: one was an enlarged replica of the famous Giambologna sculpture, *The rape of the Sabine women* (1583), the second, *Statue of Rudolf Stingel* (2011), was a wax life-size sculpture of Rudolf Stingel, an equally prominent fellow artist, and the third piece was an office chair, also made of wax. I am writing in past tense as none of the pieces exist anymore, as all three statues were actually live candles with a huge cord through them so they were burning and melting slowly throughout the time of the biennale.

The first thing one was confronted with when looking at the work was its high show-value. Making a sculpture that is the enlarged version of one of the icons of art history burn and melt is a pretty powerful statement to make. Is it taking us any further than shock, as understood in the first part of the chapter? Indeed, the piece might be seen as a contradictory image. Whenever we think of the Renaissance and its artworks, we think of a timeless tradition that is the seedbed of European culture. The Italian masterpiece (though created by an artist of Flemish origin) is timeless and indestructible; it stands as an unquestionable, untouched priceless heritage. In the case of the Fischer sculptures, this timeless artistic heritage is contrasted with the flames and slow death of a world that to a European mind, cannot be killed. Furthermore, the sculptures are not set on fire but burn from the inside, and their death is visually quite beautiful. It is the death of a tradition induced from the inside that is terrible to see. Yet, there is much beauty in this death through the dripping of the wax and the slowly melting body parts. It is not only the *Sabine women* that is burning, but also the fellow artist along with his regular looking chair. Stingel, who is of the generation supposed to become eternal next (artists never die), is also slowly melting away. The majesty of the piece is also contradicted by the association of shaped candles as cheap artifacts.

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10 Playing darts with a Rembrandt (2001) by Joseph L Sax evokes question on the untouchability of cultural products that are treated as almost divinely fetishistic objects by the culture industry. The value of these pieces is speculative but also common agreement. If this agreement is broken (e.g. someone does not acknowledge the almost priceless value of cultural objects such as a painting by Rembrandt) s/he is accused of vandalism.
This artwork cuts into our usual concepts regarding issues such as the eternal European heritage, the myth of Italy, the myth of the Renaissance and Baroque as the greatest and timeless creative epochs, the myth of the eternal artist, and so on. Furthermore, the exhibition space is a site in which the beholder is forced to confront and follow this death, smell it and feel it on their own skin. Although we, who are indebted to the European cultural tradition, would like to keep this death hidden as long as we can, as it would be a sad acknowledgement, we are forced to face up to it in one of the most prestigious art shows: the Venice Biennale. The event is in a sense a continuation of this heritage and the last drop of the myth that Italy is the centre of the art world. It is as if an actor who is suffering from cancer played his own death on stage in a play that was written about his own death. One can sense that by thinking of these paradoxes there is an ‘arrest of thoughts’ and for a moment we suddenly do not know what to think and how to think. We are part of the beautiful death of a tradition that is imposed upon us by the very people that created it.

Fig. 24. Urs Fischer, *Untitled* (2011)  
Fig. 25. Urs Fischer, *Untitled* (2011), detail
One can of course provide a straightforward interpretation of the piece that remains on a representational level; it is easy to come up with a narrative for the work. This narrative can be moving, sad and so on, but it is still a narrative that springs from the interpretation of the work. Is there a way to go beyond it? Can this artwork become an agent, an entity in itself that points beyond representation and overthrows the social structure (in this case the art history) it was created for? Hardly. Fischer’s piece stays within the confines of art and art history. One cannot let go of the narrative of the artwork, as if one did so, the work would become a purely aesthetical statement that is certainly beautiful, but does not go any deeper than that. In this sense, the work, until its very last moment, stays parasitical on its interpretation, namely on the discourse of art history and death of traditional Western culture.

The Fisher sculptures therefore create one particular kind of tear. However, I argue that art can go beyond this kind of ‘cutting’. In the following paragraphs, I will compare the Fisher experience to another 2011 Venice Biennale installation. Taiwanese artist, Hsieh Chun-te, exhibited a photo series in the Taiwanese pavilion that made the observer spend far more time at the venue than one usually does when in a rush to ‘see everything’.

The exhibition *Raw* showcased twenty-one black and white photographs created in the course of twenty-four years. The show was accompanied by a performance entitled *Cooking theatre* in which the artist personally cooked for people. The performance included shamanic humming, trance dance, nudity, blood and food and there was also an invitation to a communal dinner and food offering.\(^{11}\)

The images are contradictory because of numerous discrepancies. For instance, the distorted female body (fig. 26.) in the field can be seen either as erotic or as tortured, almost dead. The field can either represent a plantation (growth, life, softness, food) or can also be seen as a bed of nails (hard, torturous, mortal). The landscape can either be understood as painterly or as a snapshot from an old documentary of a wasteland. All this is the case, and yet it is not.

Because of the tension in the ambiguity, the image is highly disturbing and paradoxical, and it is a shock on the rational mind that looks for logical meaning. In other words, any interpretation we would hold onto is cancelled by opposing information, e.g. we see an erotic body, yet it is a raped lump of flesh. Or, the other way around, we see an abused creature yet she is posing theatrically in an (almost shameless) manner in the broken field. In the case of the image of the two men engaged in oral sex (fig. 27.) we are even

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further challenged. Is this really sex or submission? Why is there a beauty to this act that is supposed to be scandalous? Is this documentation, voyeurism or is this a set scene? Why do we get the feeling that we are witnessing some kind of religious communion or even fatherly care?

All these discrepancies are able to come together in these (contradictory) images and as a result of the tension in this synthesis, our usual, set ideas about desire, death, sex, politics, exploitation and so on are challenged. In other words, in the case of this series one can distance oneself from the narrative, as the images carry not one but probably too many narratives and interpretations. Put simply, our general, learnt behavior for finding meaning is questioned. Furthermore, unlike the Fischer piece, there is nothing to hold onto; there is a tear that emerges in our conceptual state of affairs and the images call us to reconsider our attitude towards various phenomena, until this point, safely categorized. This is a different experience from the Fischer piece as there is no discourse, no framework into which we can box the image; the piece does not operate within, but works outside any conceptual structures we can think of.

One can always say that in the case of such art as the works of Hsieh Chun-te, it is easy to experience this state of loss because these images shock. However, it has been argued in the previous sub-chapter that shock does not necessarily lead to this particular state of complete introspection. Furthermore, if one considers, for instance, Ai Weiwei’s *Study of perspective* (1995-2003), the widely known series in which the artist shows his middle finger in front of buildings of political power, one can also experience shock. One can even say that the series works as a contradictory image (although very bluntly). But does the series take us any further than the political reference the artist wants to make? Chun-te’s photographs reject representation and they refuse to partake in a particular discourse. They cut into our state of affairs, not simply within a particular segment of life (politics, art history), and not just on one level (e.g. cognitive or emotive). These images just cannot be pinned down, they escape ‘a particular’, steady interpretation. We just do not know. Or in other words: we stop knowing. And because of this not-being-able-to-grasp, just as with Ribera’s *Bearded woman*, the works tear into how we are in the world and bring us to a real

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12 By ‘conceptual state of affairs’ I mean the (inherited, learnt) framework, structure and attitude through which one relates to the world.
stopping through rupture. I have suggested above that contradictory images might be the gateway to rupture, but not every contradictory image, no matter how shocking, acts as rupture. Being contradictory is therefore a condition for rupture, but it does not explain rupture in its entirety. I propose to expand the research and look into other non-artistic practices and see if they can help articulate rupture.

4.6 Trauma and rupture

It has been argued that some artworks are able to evoke a tear or rift that is experienced as rupture, a complete incision in our state of consciousness. It has to be emphasized that the reason for looking for such art is the assumption that rupture might lead to ‘ground zero’ types of experience whose importance was elaborated in Chapter One. It was argued that the concept of the dialectical image might not be sufficient to pin down rupture, therefore there is a need to look elsewhere. I propose to look at another, non-artistic state, namely trauma, and see if the experience of trauma could be analogous with rupture.

It might seem strange that it is trauma that I bring into comparison. As the previous sub-chapter argued there needs to be contradiction for rupture to arise. It is not only art that is able to come up with a contradictory practice; in our everyday life we find practices that work as images. If we take our own frame of mind, through which we understand the world, as a statement, let us say, ‘image A’, there are bound to be practices that appear to attack that image, in the form of discordant statements. Let us call these practices ‘image B’, practices that are experienced as contradictory, conflicting or incongruous with our general frame of mind, with our ‘image A’. If ‘image B’ is embraced, it creates a contradictory image in one’s existence, as both ‘image A’ and the conflicting ‘image B’ are placed next to one another, and forced to coexist. Everybody can think of experiences from their life, when they were confronted with ideas, theories or experience that needed to be dealt with, but which they simply could not place into their frame of reference. These experiences vary from mild to brutal. I can think of experiences such as visiting India and seeing people bathing in the river Ganges while the remains of a burnt corpse floated passed them. Such sights shock the mind and one’s worldview has to be reevaluated. More brutal examples could include being
fired from a job, going through a divorce, being in an accident, war and other forms of 
trauma. One is gravely or mildly shocked by the conflicting ‘image B’ statements being put 
next to one's ‘image A’. The most extreme case generally associated with this kind of shock 
is trauma.

**Trauma**

It is not my intention here to give an extensive analysis of trauma, nonetheless I will 
focus on how and in what way trauma might create a tear, and whether this kind of ‘cut’ is 
alogous with rupture by art.

Trauma usually arises when the person is not prepared, or cannot be prepared, to 
undergo a stressful experience. It is a state of shock, inflicted upon our conceptual state of 
affairs. It is too much to bear, too powerful to embrace, too strong or too contradictory to 
build into our frame of references. What is trauma and what might be seen as traumatic? 
Given that the term is not self-explanatory and various phenomena and psychological 
conditions can be paired with the concept, let me briefly peek into the theoretical 
background of the field. There is vast literature on the subject that acknowledges that 
trauma can and cannot be seen as a unified concept. Some sources say that trauma is 
inherent to our lives. For instance, in his article ‘Are we born into trauma?’ (2011), Frederick 
Woolverton lists theorists who argue that trauma characterizes us from birth. Woolverton 
reaches back to Otto Rank who argues that human beings suffer trauma at birth. The perfect 
union we have with our mothers while inside the womb is torn apart by the violent act of 
being born. Rank echoes Freud and sees the roots of the earliest human anxiety in this 
separation. “The way the infant experiences this early separation from the mother, Rank 
wrote, becomes the foundation for all anxieties experienced later in the individual's life” 
(Woolverton 2011).

This idea is in line with the concept of psychoanalyst, Wilfred Bion, who argues that 
the infant is born into a state of confusion in which new impulses hit the infant as 
unbearable experiences. It depends on the mother to “contain” these early experiences and 
make them tolerable for the infant. If the mother is doing a good job, the infant learns to

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14 Various therapeutic practices including the entire discipline of psychoanalysis can be seen as revolving 
around the concept of trauma from Freud until today. Trauma studies is also present in literature, film and fine 
art, notable authors are Paul de Man, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman among others.
exist with this initial shock of the birth trauma and unexpected outside experiences, and will not be haunted by them (Woolverton 2011).

These concepts state that trauma might basically follows us through life, and the job of psychoanalysis is to help the patient digest these traumatic situations. According to trauma experts mentioned above, given that we are born into families and we interact with one another, we constantly traumatize each other so trauma underlies the human condition.

When looking at theories of trauma chronologically, the first writings date back to before the First World War. Literature that specifically focuses on outstanding cases starts with Freud’s treatment of women suffering from hysteria. He believed that there was a connection between symptoms of hysteria and the sexual exploitation his patients had to endure. After the First World War, the study of trauma became more urgent, when many soldiers, who although being diagnosed with shell-shock, showed psychological symptoms that could not have been only the result of the physical injury they had endured. Most practitioners could not understand why brave grown man would be shattered after such heroic events as war, so they reacted accordingly, namely by disgracing the patients. In England, it was WHR Rivers who was the first doctor not to humiliate his clients but treat them with his “talking cure”. Fortunately, after the Second World War, and especially after Vietnam, the medical world began to realize that victims of war, including soldiers coming home completely crippled emotionally, needed serious, special medical attention. It was not until 1980, though, that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) became an officially acknowledged term and patients were treated accordingly. Nowadays, this diagnosis has also diversified, as professionals have discovered that different symptoms emerge after different types of trauma, so for instance rape cases need different treatment to those who have undergone organized political torture (Herman, 2003: 1-43).

Despite the obvious differences between birth trauma and the trauma of rape or torture, and the fact that individuals react differently to say a difficult upbringing, there is nevertheless a common thread running through all these types of trauma, and that is the space of trauma.

Eric Harper, psychoanalyst, who has done extensive work with tortured victims, homeless people and sex-workers describes this space as:
... a break in the social bond, in the symbolic world, limits the person's ability to absorb their experience into a symbolic framework, with the result that the person is haunted by unassailable images. The imposed images are indelible. The person has incorporated something alien that cannot be represented through his/her traditional frames of reference. The person is no longer human in the way he/she was before ...; homeless, alien to oneself - a foreign body, a remainder, not only resides inside them but also engulfs them.15

In other words, in the case of trauma there is a tear in the Symbolic, a term introduced by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, elaborated below; there is a foreign entity sitting in the body that cannot be fit into the usual frame of references we use to deal with the world. It is an unrepresentable entity that haunts and freezes whether we realize it or not. A the Wedemeyer film, Muster, analyzed in Chapter Three, so beautifully portrays, there is void, lack, non-existence with a tangible body. One cannot build up a Symbolic, as the Real (the wound, the trauma) is too present, and therefore cannot be articulated.16 Trauma and related experience do not fit into the world as we know it; as Shoshana Felman writes: “The event ... occurs ... as what is not provided for by the conceptual framework we call ‘History,’ and as what in general, has no place in, and therefore cannot be assimilated by or integrated into, any existing cultural frame of reference” (1992:104).

As Felman implies, trauma takes place outside the frame of references in which we are taught to exist. One simply cannot grasp, cannot comprehend or internalize trauma. In trauma there is no space to imagine, there is not an Imaginary (again, Lacan), nor there is space to start fantasizing about a new life and new reality.

Having covered briefly what trauma might stand for, it is time to ask where and how the analogy with art takes place. Before I return to rupture, I have to note that generally art is not considered traumatic; on the contrary, it is looked upon as a tool of healing. The reason for this lies in the making of images, namely imagination. Being able to imagine might be key for getting out of trauma. Lilla Hárdi, medical director of the Cordelia Foundation for the Rehabilitation of Torture Victims, Hungary, argues that the sign of

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15 Personal email conversation, 2014.
16 The structure of the psyche that I am referring to here is the Lacan-ian concept of Real, Imaginary and Symbolic. This is concept is explained later on in the chapter.
healing is when the patient starts to plan, to imagine a new life. This ‘being able to dream’ is a way out of the Real, refining the Imaginary for the sake of constructing a new Symbolic reality. (See below the explanation of these terms).

The role and force of art in relation to trauma is usually associated not with traumatizing, or tearing apart, but with ‘putting together’, reconstructing and healing. Coming up with images, symbolization and visualization offer a way out of the unbearable experience of the Real. This is why art is special, since by creating images (to image-in), the Real is canalized into some form of representation, therefore can be contained again. Felman is thinking along the same lines, when she comments on *The Plague* by Camus who uses the symbol of the plague to deal with the Holocaust: “It is precisely because history as holocaust proceeds from a *failure to imagine*, that it takes an imaginative medium like the Plague to gain an insight into its historical reality, as well as into the attested historicity of its unimaginability” (1992:105).

In other words, art helps one to construct an imaginary realm in which the void of the trauma can become a tangible body, although this reconstruction of the trauma is not as easy as it seems. Felman dedicates this special force generally to literature, and sees the making of these imaginary spaces as an important in preventing (the same) mistake being made (again): “Literature bears testimony not just to duplicate or to record events, but to make history available to the imaginative act whose historical unavailability has prompted, and made possible, a holocaust” (1992:108).

It is clear that to Felman art does not operate in the same way as trauma does: art can offer a way out of trauma through the imaginative act. Art is a way of being able to deal with trauma, bringing it back to the level of the bearable. Obviously, the kind of art Felman is referring to is not the art of rupture but the art of putting the shattered pieces together again. There is, of course, art that operates in this way. Nonetheless, the question relevant for this research remains the same: can the kind of art – not the kind that constructs and builds, but the kind that ‘cuts through’ – be seen as traumatic? Is the rupture described as an experience induced by the Ribera piece or by Chun-te images analogous with trauma?

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17 Personal email correspondence, 2015, Budapest.
Art as trauma

Some people believe that for art to make a real impact, it should be traumatic. In that case art is not about healing, helping to imagine and putting together the pieces that have fallen apart, but art that is about ‘tearing into’. And, as suggested in the previous sub-chapter, the most extreme experience of shattering is trauma. The person who became infamous for mentioning art and trauma together was Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928-2007). The venerable German composer’s shocking remarks on the events of 9/11 outraged the world of art and culture. At a press conference for one of the music festivals in Hamburg just a few days after the tragedy, he called the attack “the greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos.” Furthermore, he added: “Minds achieving something in an act that we couldn’t even dream of in music, people rehearsing like mad for ten years, preparing fanatically for a concert, and then dying; just imagine what happened there. You have people who are that focused on a performance and then 5,000 people are dispatched to the afterlife, in a single moment. I couldn’t do that. By comparison, we composers are nothing” (Stockhausen quoted by Castle 2011).

At first sight, this quote reads as if Stockhausen envied and admired the terrorists for creating an act: an artwork no musician could ever dream of. Most people had this simplistic reading and judged the composer for glorifying terrorism. Later Stockhausen claimed to have been misunderstood, but refused to comment further on his remarks. The art world was shaken by his comments and as a consequence his daughter, a renowned pianist, rejected her father’s name. Furthermore, after his commentary, Stockhausen’s concerts were cancelled. However, there were people who were not so quick to judge, and started pondering on his remarks. For instance, Terry Castle (2011) professor of English, writes that the comments made him wonder if “there’s something artlike or ‘aesthetic’ about 9/11”? He pondered whether Stockhausen’s comments should be understood in the tradition of rebellious European avant-garde and the fascination with purity that is brought on by war, the general enthusiasm and expectation in artists that was seen before the First World War. Was Stockhausen mixing up life with art? After all, he was known for wanting to overcome the boundaries between the two (Castle 2011).

This is certainly a harsh statement, but one wonders what Stockhausen might have meant by these - certainly misplaced – words. If one takes his comments as a remark on art,
what might they stand for and do they have anything to do with rupture? In my opinion, one can read his comments as a call for art that really does have an impact on life. Furthermore, he wants to see art that, in a sense, stops life, brings it to a complete standstill. Does this stoppage explain rupture? To me, Stockhausen’s understanding of stopping is devastation, not a space opening up for further potentials. It appears that Stockhausen saw good art as traumatic; in the end there is death, a full arrest of life. However, he did not take into consideration that new life cannot be born from trauma. Trauma is void, lack, pure presence without space for the new. There is no imagination in trauma, only the presence (of the trauma) that is there without a distance. In trauma there is no space to imagine, whereas rupture that is a complete erasure is expected to point towards an empty space of potentials, towards a new life. Looking at contemporary art, I think that although in trauma there is presence without absence, in art through rupture – as suggested by the Chun-te photographs – there is absence with very little presence. Trauma is a void; pure presence without space; trauma does not lead anywhere but freezes life. Contrary to this, in contemporary art, rupture, leading to ‘ground zero’, might be seen as a space of potentials from which indeed an Imaginary can spring. So the rupture of trauma is probably not analogous with the rupture of contemporary art. If rupture is not trauma, what is it then? If trauma erases, halts and freezes, what is it that rupture is able to do?

4.7 The impact of rupture

Rupture in art, cutting through our conceptual state of affairs, creates space for the viewer to approach the world differently. What emerges as a consequence of rupture is “another way of cutting up the universe”.

In Stockhausen’s concept of art as trauma, this new glance at the things-of-the-world is not possible. Therefore, I turn elsewhere for other possible explanations, to Rancière, who might have the closest understanding of how rupture operates. When asking the question: ‘what is it that the rupture of art is able to do?’ Rancière argues that it creates “… a shift from a given sensible world to another sensible world that defines different capacities and incapacities, different forms of tolerance and intolerance. What occurs are processes of

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18 As suggested by John Carey (2005), cited in Chapter One.
dissociations: a break in a relationship between sense and sense – between what is seen and what is thought, what is thought and what is felt” (2011:75). Rupture in art, to Rancière is therefore not about erasure, devastation or trauma. Instead, it is a different articulation of the world: a “shift from a given sensible world to … another”. According to Rancière, the force of art lies in this ability to revaluate the frame of references we would use to relate to the world. The rupture that tears us apart, forces us to reconsider the thread of conventional understanding, of old routines that we take for granted. Rancière considers that art that works (in the sense it exercises rupture) is the one that redraws the boundaries of consensual lines of reality and reconfigures the field of consensus (2011). In other words, it pulls taken-for-granted frames of references apart and raises the possibility (not more than that, just the possibility) of a reconfigured subject-object relation. He believes the only thing art can do is to open up a space which might enable us to reshape the frames of experience (Rancière 2011).

Although I am quite sympathetic towards this idea, I maintain that Rancière stays on the ‘soft’ side. He argues that through art the world can be grasped differently and indeed, this is the case. However, he ignores the force of this act. As Carey says, this “cutting up” really might be a cut that is an action with a force. Rupture is a strong experience, a shattering indeed. Not devastating, like trauma, but there is a halt in one’s state of consciousness and this ‘cutting through’ weighs on the viewer.

There is a complete ‘cutting through’ but there is not destruction. What is the difference between the two? Let me illustrate through an analogy. In a debate, for instance, one can talk to someone in a way that brutally destroys that person’s ideas, so they are left feeling shattered and annulled. Or one can communicate in a way that although the person’s taken-for-granted structures are interrogated to the core, space is still given to them for thinking things otherwise. One can sense the radical difference between the two. The former leads to the person feeling terrible and losing everything they had; the latter is also hard, yet opens up space for being otherwise. Rupture in contemporary art is a crucial act, a crack that opens up space for reconfiguration. It generates the possibility to imagine alternative ways of being in the world.

At this point, in order to show how radical this force might be, we need to move onto the next argument and introduce psychoanalysis. The space in contemporary art

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As Ziarek would argue, see Ch. 2.
created by rupture is analogous with the realm that – in my reading - Lacan calls the Imaginary. It represents to the viewer the possibility to dream and imagine ways of being in the world differently, outside or beyond the frame of references they base their lives on. This is not a light and dreamy act, though, but a radical one, as it takes a lot for the seemingly imperturbable walls of the Symbolic to crumble. This can often be a painful experience. But the liberty we gain from getting the chance of no longer identifying with and thinking that our frame of references is set in stone, is a gift. So what is it exactly that breaks down, what is being torn into by contemporary art? I turn to psychoanalysis to explore Lacan’s concept of the ‘Real, Imaginary and Symbolic’ in order to get a better understanding on the possible impact of rupture.

4.8 Rupture on the Symbolic

When confronting the rupture of contemporary art, the beholder might sense that there is a break in one’s usual frame of reference. It might be a sensation of a minor shock during which all of a sudden there is a misrecognition, or perhaps even an experience of de-realization in which one does not understand what is going on. As one slowly follows the artwork and tries to reorient oneself, one becomes aware of a break in the signifying chain and of the false connections previously taken for granted. The exposure of false connections is usually anxiety-provoking, but one becomes aware that the taken-for-granted way one has previously linked signifiers and paired up concepts (as in the case of the Chun-te images), no longer works.

But what is it exactly that breaks? Where does this rupture take place? What is torn into? The inner ‘site’ where rupture acts can be understood as our mundane conceptual state of affairs through which we understand and structure the world. Jacques Lacan coined this realm as the ‘Symbolic’. The Symbolic is a realm of personality (development) that ties into two other concepts, the Imaginary and Real. But before I elaborate upon these three concepts and the importance of understanding them from the viewpoint of the contemporary art experience, I will put them in a broader context. I will introduce Lacan’s concept of the ego that he understands as the outcome of the Mirror-stage. One needs to understand these complex ideas, to order to grasp the Symbolic and the rifting nature of
contemporary art. Although these would call for a lengthy introduction, I present a short analysis through the understanding of Lacanian scholar, psychoanalyst Richard Klein, and psychoanalyst Eric Harper.\textsuperscript{20}

What is the \textit{ego} in Lacan’s teaching? The ego is not the subject but it is an object, it is imagined and has an imaginary function (synthesis, the creation of the ideal, whole, closure and rapport). It is nothing but an imaginary structure that is assimilated into an image, not just any image, but one by which we are relentlessly captivated and captured. The essential attribute of an image that produces this effect lies in the anticipation of a unity which is the total body form that it provokes in the subject. The ego is formed through a narcissistic encounter with a mirror image of oneself that takes place in childhood. The mirror gives an image of completeness, a total body form that will take precedence over the fragmented body, providing the child with a primary identification. The child exists within this imaginary plane as an adaptive ego striving to reach an unattainable unity with the specular image. This narcissistic structure, made up of identifications supported by ideals, enables the ego to see itself as its own ideal image.\textsuperscript{21}

In other words, Lacan sees the ego as an object that is the result of fantasies triggered by the idea of wholeness, completeness. It comes to life through the mirror image, as what we see is a complete image that is supposed to represent us. The child finds the complete mirror image unified, and tries everything to adjust the fragmented inner world to this complete image. It is important to explain how this happens, as adults may go through the same thing after experiencing rupture. It is clear, then, that Lacan understands mirroring to be of crucial importance when setting up an analysis of the ego. Let me explain in more depth what takes place in the mirror-stage. The child is born out of the \textit{(m)other}’s desire for a want of being. The child is born from a lack and takes up a position of lacking, a want-to-be, that is the desire to pass from non-existence to existence - a logic of union. In this stage of the Real, the infant at the breast does not yet distinguish his ego from the external world. A moment arrives when the infant encounters its body through the mirror (and mirroring of the mother) and assumes this body image to be its own. It makes an imaginary identification

\textsuperscript{20} Richard Klein and Eric Harper are psychoanalysts currently working in London, UK. Klein is the founder of various psychoanalytical societies that follow the theories of Jacques Lacan. Harper is a (Lacan-ian) psychoanalyst. They are also close friends, and were kind enough to explain the complex theories of Lacan to me in personal discussions as well as through the exchange of various emails.

\textsuperscript{21} As explained by Klein and Harper, email correspondence, 2014.
with this image but fails to realize that it is something external, that there is a gap which is concealed by the imaginary identification. As Amanda Loos (2002), in her summary of Lacan’s ideas, argues: “This image in the mirror is the image of coherence – of what makes the world and our place as complete subjects in it make sense. It becomes a process of identification of internal self with that external image. The mirror stage thus represents the infant’s first encounter with subjectivity, with spatial relations, with an external sense of coherence, and with a sense of ‘I’ and ‘You’.”

It is through the Mirror-stage that the infant starts a relationship with the outside world and also with itself. The child is no longer a non-self, a part of the complete immersion with the mother. This identification with the mirror-image brings with it delight. The encounter with a third term (the image) breaks the party; the duality of the mother-child. The establishment of the social bond occurs.\(^{22}\)

It is at this stage that the Symbolic steps into play. On entering the public speech-circuit there is a semantic effect (production of meaning) on what is imaginary. This symbolic inscription, upon the imaginary trunk of the body, ties the subject’s speech to identification. The symbolic is what designates the objective order and enables distinctions to be made between different images. The symbolic representation is made possible through the use of language. The Symbolic is a chain of signifiers, which must consist of at least two signifiers: Signifier 1 + Signifier 2. The linking of signifiers produces meaning and the meaning of any signifier is always in relation to another signifier. Language is structure and it is symbolic (Klein, Harper 2014).

This is how Lacan sees the development of the ego in childhood. The final stage is language, symbolization and being in the world through a chain of signifiers. It is important to understand this development, and especially its final stage, as it is here, at this realm, that rupture makes an impact. But I am running ahead of myself. Before I return to this realm, it is necessary to go more deeply into Lacan’s concept of the Real-Imaginary-Symbolic, to get a clear understanding of the force of rupture.

Parallel to the Mirror-stage, Lacan outlines a theory of psyche and identifies three orders in which certain modes of subjectivity work. These three orders are the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, already mentioned. In my re-reading of Lacan, I argue that the Real is a space which the infant has settled into before the Mirror-stage, in other words,  

\(^{22}\) As explained by Klein and Harper, email correspondence, 2014.
before he starts developing his relationship with the outside world. This is a stage of pre-representation, a pre-symbolic, filled with impulses that cannot be presented. In an adult personality – and through this analogy we can probably understand it better - it is a state in which words fail, in which there is too much to tell, which is too painful to represent, or the other way around, too ecstatic to talk about. It is a site of excess and not enough lack, there is no gap for desire. If one thinks of severe trauma such as an accident, death, torture, the trauma of World War Two or the lives of the girls in detention houses touched upon in the Wedemeyer film, one can grasp what this ‘Real’ stands for: it covers experience in which the self is not separated, but overwhelmed by the experience without being able to imagine or exist outside that experience.

When the infant starts to develop a relationship with the outside world, they develop a nexus with themselves and the mirror image. They possibly recognize themselves in the mirror and step into the state of the Imaginary. This is the state when the infant slowly recognizes its body, but at this point still does not know that there is a world out there. In a summary of Lacan’s three realms, Loos (2002) explains that this stage is an intermittent, mediatory stage that is characterized by “the internalized image of … ideal, whole, self and is situated around the notion of coherence rather than fragmentation. The imaginary can roughly be aligned with the formation of the ego which serves as the mediator between the internal and the external world.”

In other words, the Imaginary is a state of fantasies and desires, created and intertwined both within the inner and outer world. Finally, the third stage, as I identify it, bearing in mind that Lacan does not see work with a notion of development or stages, but rather structural encounters, is the engagement with what Lacan identifies as Symbolic. It involves language, organizes the subject, creates the ability to abstract, makes the world and us exist in structure. In the Symbolic, there is ‘meaning’, ‘interpretation’, things have to ‘make sense’ and happen with a particular goal in mind for a specific order. Symbolic reality is the one that we create for ourselves and eventually believe that it really is our world, and we have no choice but live it. In other words, we create a particular life because we think that that is the life we have to live (e.g. become a mother, a banker, a strict father etc.) and we are convinced that this specific reality, ours, could not be otherwise. This reality is played by specific rules that all others who live with us have to (more or less) follow. Symbolic orders, when chosen together, create a society in which the idea of difference is usually
terrifying, because we cannot even believe that we could live this world “otherwise”. This Symbolic reality is so strong that we forget that we created it ourselves and that we could have created it differently.

All of this is important to consider, as every time we need to redefine how we relate to the world, we have to go through the same process again; in a sense we repeat the ego development through the Mirror-stage. The Real steps in, we start imagining, and we symbolize; in other words we make a new sense of the world. Starting from the Real that is made up of instincts and drives the human being creates a Symbolic reality through the Imaginary by constantly testing the possible options of constructing a Symbolic order. Whichever Symbolic reality, inspired by the Imaginary, works best is going to be called one’s (new) life.

Having said all this, one wonders just how contemporary art as rupture makes an impact. Rupture is expected to tear into the system outlined above. Using two examples I will explore where and how rupture interrupts our steady ego structure.

4.9 The potentials of rupture in contemporary art

Artworks such as the Chun-te images or Uncle R by Tinei might be seen as a rupture in the Symbolic. Our uncanny sensation comes because of discrepancies; a tension is embedded in contradictions that are not reconciled by the images. In the case of Uncle R, we see a painting stuck in between identities. Uncle R is neither an adolescent, nor a grown man, neither a victim nor a perpetrator, neither an agent nor a victim, neither a photograph, nor a traditional portrait. Is this painting a testimony? Much art and literature written after the Second World War can be seen as a testimony (see Felman). If it is, then what does it testify? Referring back to Felman, if the role of literature is to help us to imagine (e.g. create an Imaginary), what kind of Imaginary is being evoked by Uncle R?

It is precisely at this point where rupture lies. In the case of this painting, there is no Imaginary offered. Because of his ungraspable ambiguity, Uncle R points beyond the possible narratives one could put on the image. Although there might be a narrative, meaning the painting can be seen as representation, somehow one is always invited beyond
representation. The symbolization – unlike in Camus’ *The Plague* or Raphael’s *Madonna* – does not seem to be sufficient to grasp the image. Instead, the same void that emerges in the Wedemeyer film defines *Uncle R*. The *Real* in the case of this image is the not-knowing, not-being-able to grasp, no comprehension; instead we find ourselves in a stoppage: not-knowing, not-being-able to place, interrogation, and non-statements: and they wound the safely built structure of our Symbolic. Although no prescribed Imaginary is given, as there would be for the other two pieces mentioned in comparison, there is no destruction, as there would be in the case of trauma. It does not mean that the Imaginary is not going to work; it will, but there is no anticipation.

Why is the experience of rupture unique? It is suggested that the Imaginary works differently in the case of such contemporary art experience, but how? Let us revisit the Wedemeyer film for possible answers. The work ruptures my usual state of affairs on how I, for instance, have been thinking about the relationship of trauma and the Holocaust. The film, by confronting me with *Real* - in this case the unspeakable frustration of trauma – tears down the distance I used to have toward the Holocaust, and the boredom I experienced when I listened to endless recitations of the stories. (Being part of the generation that suffers from Holocaust fatigue, my usual way of coping with the Holocaust and its stories used to be burdened boredom.) Given that trauma cannot be told, it cannot be represented, I could not connect my personal experience of trauma with that of Holocaust survivors in general. The film, by cutting into my Symbolic (in my case my attitude of treating the Holocaust with reserved boredom), did not make me re-imagine the story of the terror. Instead, it made the void of the trauma tangible by *not* showing, by admittedly *not being able to show*. The film stayed in that space of impossibility for its entire eighty minutes, making the trauma of the Holocaust acutely present, universal and something I could relate to. This art experience, unlike other previously discussed Holocaust monuments, does *not tell me what* to think about the Holocaust or how to relate to survivors. It is precisely by not being told what and how to do that, that I, as observer, can let the void of the trauma in and start working with it, building up internal images, or in other words, imagining.

So after all, there is also an Imaginary in such art, however it is neither predefined, nor anticipated. Therefore, what actually takes place in art to create rupture, is not what takes place in trauma. In art, when the *Real* enters through the hole in the texture of the Symbolic, it generates numerous options (images) that can be the foundation of alternative
realities. However, it is unlike the Imaginary generated by art such as *The Plague* by Camus, the Raphael *Madonna* or the Fisher piece through where one is already told what to imagine. In the art of rupture the Imaginary is there, but it works differently, rather like a dream: one never knows what is coming next. Maybe, it is through this ‘dreaming’, as opposed to ‘telling’, in other words through rupture, that the ‘ground zero’ of art invites us to re-imagine the world we live in.

To conclude, I would like to suggest that in order to get a different, not prescribed, and personal grasp on matters such as the Holocaust, contemporary art through rupture can indeed open up a space of absence through which individual associations and personal connections can take place. Through rupture, and by not being told what to think, feel, imagine, through a tear in the personal Symbolic with the force of the Real (rupture), an empty, yet potential space opens. In this space the beholder is given a chance to relate to the things-of-the-world in yet unknown ways, and imagine an alternative.

The final chapter concentrates on the nature of this non-teleological change through which the beholder might be able to let the unexpected arrive, grasp the world and transform his or her attitude in ways that are free of predefined criteria and expectations.