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Loss, vulnerability and the need to tell

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A number of works in *Transgressions and boundaries of the page* deal with the notion of vulnerability – in terms of mental or physical health, or in terms of the vulnerability of the environment, among others. Vulnerability is associated with loss, either potential or real, because to be vulnerable means that one's strength and agency are threatened. It follows that vulnerability and loss point to silence, disease and loss of agency, which are posited as negative binaries in terms of speaking, health and agency. Experiences of loss and vulnerability, whether of a personal or more collective nature, are articulated by the artists speaking up about various kinds of loss in their works. When they speak up, they are heard (or seen or read), and so they gain agency. Without this agency, one runs the risk of becoming extinct – or, in some cases, the concern of one's work runs the risk of becoming extinct. Extinction is therefore the ultimate silence.

In a historical sense, personas become extinct unless they are given voice where there used to be silence. A silenced voice that is finally given an audience, and therefore becomes known and heard (or read, more specifically) is found in Leora

Farber's *The futility of writing 24-page letters*. In this work the story of the Victorian woman Bertha Guttman (Marks) unfolds as an ode to frustration, subjugation and the feeling of loss at not having one's voice heard – or one's letters read. The way in which Guttman/Mark's husband shuns her attempts at communicating with him is laid bare in this work as an intimate moment of great resonance: it speaks of the female other relegated to a position of eternal silence. Farber's work gives voice to Bertha's story so that the spectator/reader can gain insight into a silenced (female) history of otherness, and therefore the spectator becomes Bertha's long-desired reader. Co-opting the present-day reader into her sphere of communication points to the authority given to the reader or viewer: he or she has the responsibility of listening, reading and knowing, in order to grant Bertha a sense of agency – and to safeguard the memory of her from extinction – by seeing history from her point of view.

The nature of vulnerability and voicelessness is articulated in Fanie Viljoen's *Pynstiller* which deals with self-mutilation. Self-mutilation ironically aims at

numbing pain by inflicting more pain, which only increases one's powerlessness and vulnerability. By sharing experiences of self-mutilation, web participants¹ in Viljoen's project gain a sense of shared humanity, most likely regain a sense of self, and in this sharing the extinction of the voice of the self can be overcome. In a spiritual sense, this work therefore has the character of a confessional. This not only implies a desire to heal through admission (as found in the tradition of the confession) but also to gain some sort of public acknowledgement and absolution. Once again, the audience (who reads, browses and sees) is asked to "save" the sufferer by means of his or her acknowledgement. Co-opting the audience in this manner is cathartic for the self-mutilator who has been silenced – given the shame associated with such practices – and he or she thus gains a sense of voice.

To mutilate the self is to violate boundaries between the acceptable and the

¹ *Pynstiller* was published on Facebook – where group members could confess their own self-mutilation actions and thoughts – see <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=94259061126>.

unacceptable. It entails altering the exterior aspect of identity in order to suggest changes to interior aspects of one's identity: it turns the self into an other, a situation that is rectified, as indicated, with the help of the audience. Here the work of Richardt Strydom and Jaco Burger (*Ad hominem*) comes to mind. It addresses feelings of helplessness and vulnerability in white South African males in particular, and explores how powerlessness translates into aggression that is expressed through masochistic impulses – similar to self-mutilation, and equally threatening to existence. What is acceptable and unacceptable, and what can be said publicly and privately, are unpacked in this work through photographs, laser cuttings and quotations from poems and lyrics suggestive of both violence and guilt, again bordering on the confessional in search of absolution and authenticity that can be granted by an audience who engages with the issue in an empathic manner. Of course, the issue at stake is the identity of the white Afrikaans male – with his guilt, his aspiration and his aggression.

Other works that explore identity and its complexities include the contributions by David Paton *Speaking in Tongues: Speaking Digitally/Digitally Speaking*. The use of his son's and mother's hands – both in a concertina folder book-object and as digital projection, suggests vulnerable familial identities – the old and the young can both be seen as others. Also, fragility as opposed to strength and agency is associated with both youth and old age. Evocative, nostalgic and infinitely gentle, the dialogue between these pairs of hands is intimate yet universal. How fragile, how precious the most random movements of those whom we love; and at the same

time, how ephemeral these moments are. Our awareness of the potential of loss and extinction, and the importance of memories are therefore a poignant theme in this work. Similar attempts to save memories (and people) from extinction feature in various guises in other artists' books.

Alwyn Roux buries his words to an "unknown" loved one in an X-ray (*Die gedig as 'n vreemdeling se graf*) so that the viewer finds traces of lost love in the grave that the book has become. This work seems to link the loss of a person, and of love, to a bleak vision: the memory of bones. Nonetheless, the execution of *Vreemdeling se graf* is delicate and hints at fragile moments that threaten to become extinct in the haze of memory.

In a different sense, Strijdom van der Merwe and Jo-Marie Rabe's book *Verneukpan/Bitterputs* is a take on how fragile memories are, and how this can be linked to remembering places. Moreover, extinction of memory is linked to the loss of entire peoples such as the !Xam. This book is at once a document on the almost-extinct people of Verneukpan, as well as a subjective take on the experience of a journey through memory and place. John Moore's *A tale of tales* similarly engages with the vulnerability of sacred Bushman relics and narratives that fade as this race is threatened to the verge of extinction, and does so by presenting a book in which meaning threatens to fade physically between the pages.

Awareness of loss and the possibility of environmental extinction can also be seen in the ecologically concerned *fin.* by Ian Marley, where the mutilated landscape, brilliantly beautiful in its scarrified state, seems to be frozen as a silent, curious

archeological display of an extinct entity. The hardness of the Perspex covers belies the theme of fragility, which is carried further in the execution (laser engraving) in order to suggest the loss and extinction of the landscape as a vulnerable phenomenon. This work can be linked, conceptually, to Jan van der Merwe's *Sleepmerke*, where traces of trees are all that remain in burnt-out charcoal ends. Trees metaphorically stand in for an entire ecosystem that is driven to systematic extinction, and also for memories of things that are transformed beyond recognition.

Ecology, loss and the threat of extinction have similarly played a central role in the conceptualisation and execution of Rosalind Cleaver's *Hard Pressed*, which explores the impact of environmental degradation on the species Hewitt's Ghost Frog. Playing with the concept of the flower press and the pine tree in an environmental deadlock, Cleaver raises awareness of how vulnerable the notion of biodiversity has become, and how loss and extinction are likely to be a consequence of progress. Her work gives voice to a species that is silenced. A related concern for loss of the natural environment appears in Strijdom van der Merwe's land art work *Sculpting the land* where the very art form engages with the transitory nature of beauty: nature can reclaim herself after the work is left and only photographs remain to bear testimony to the aesthetic "interference" brought about by the artist. This practice directs the attention to the fragility of nature and begs the onlooker to contemplate the natural flow and ebb of things – a flow that threatens to become extinct in our highly industrialised world.

The threat of environment manifests itself

in a different way in Maggie van Schalkwyk's *Displacement* which deals with the personal loss of children to geographical displacement but which also addresses xenophobic impulses – thereby placing a personal narrative in a universal context. Van Schalkwyk seems to mourn the fact that the connectedness between parents and children is much more vulnerable than one would perhaps imagine.

Franci Greyling's *Tinboektoe toe* offers a more playful angle on displacement and dissemination by tracing postcard responses by a wide variety of recipients in order to suggest something of the fragmented nature of meaning-making. She combats the extinction of meaning by involving many role-players in a process that sets up new avenues and associations for the narrative to unfold, even though some of the narrative content became extinct – by being lost in the mail.

Vulnerability, loss and the threat of extinction may refer to meaning, identity, ecology or desires. In *Transgressions and boundaries of the page* a number of artists have hinted at the nature of loss, and of the consequences thereof, in various ways: nostalgically, compassionately, environmentally, ephemerally and playfully. The richness of the theme becomes even greater so when the works are viewed in dialogue as various aspects of the theme are highlighted in divergent approaches. The need to share experiences of vulnerability and loss in a public display by means of creative engagement co-opts audiences as confessors; the sharing of experiences gives voice to silences and saves the issue from extinction.