Aesthetic Wit(h)nessing Within a Matrixial Imaginary
Témoignage et cohabitation esthétiques au sein de l’imaginaire matriciel

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Abstract
This article is the first in depth introduction of Bracha L. Ettinger’s matrixial theory to education, with implications for how it reads empathy differently and critically compared to a phallic theory approach which tends to dominate generally in the world of art and aesthetics in modern times. The authors (life-partners), as educators and as artists, reflect on an experience of tragedy in their lives, while presenting a collaborative art series in order to demonstrate some of the qualities of matrixial art. Matrixial theory suggests we have to think differently about thinking itself and thinking-the-aesthetic and role of art as a transport station for trauma (and potential healing) in the context of our contemporary world. Aesthetic/art education can offer, as can some socially-engaged art-events, an effective counter-hegemony and critical re-thinking, reconnection and concomitant change and transformation of the way we perceive the world and live in/with it.

Key Words: aesthetic empathy, artworking, originary compassion, matrixial theory, non-violence

Résumé
Cet article constitue la toute première introduction approfondie de la théorie matricielle de Bracha L. Ettinger en éducation, incluant ses implications quant à l’interprétation différente et critique de l’empathie par rapport à une approche phallique, approche qui tend généralement à primer dans le domaine des arts et de l’esthétique en cette ère contemporaine. À titre d’éducateurs et d’artistes, les auteurs (partenaires dans la vie), abordent leur expérience de la tragédie en présentant parallèlement une œuvre artistique collaborative pour illustrer certaines des qualités de l’art matriciel. La théorie matricielle donne à penser qu’il nous faut voir autrement la réflexion elle-même et considérer l’esthétique et le rôle de l’art comme une station de transport des traumatismes (et de la guérison éventuelle) au sein de notre univers moderne. L’esthétique et l’éducation artistique peuvent être sources, au même titre que certains événements artistiques à caractère social, d’un nouveau regard critique anti-hégémonie, d’une reprise de contact, d’évolution et de transformation parallèles de notre vision du monde et de la façon dont nous y vivons.

Mots clés : empathie esthétique, création d’œuvres d’art, compassion originaire, théorie matricielle, non-violence.
Our work as critical arts-based researchers and educators is informed by our art making practices and the contextual problems of the human condition—in particular, how experience, feelings, emotions, self-identity, empathy and compassion play crucial roles in healing and ethical emancipation agendas. Our combined career trajectories which include environmental studies, human services and roles as cultural activists significantly color our academic, education and community work—yet, as practicing artists, we work to ensure that art leads our thinking, inquiries and actions.

Defining art and artist in the widest sense, in a 21st century context we approach empathy, aesthetics and ethics as interwoven domains that ought to be informed by what Bracha Ettinger calls artworking, or what some call arts-based research (e.g. Barone & Eisner, 2012). Ettinger’s artworking however, is differentiated from arts-based research in that it is wholly located in the “trauma paradigm” or “trauma culture” of social awareness and academic studies (Andermahr & Pellicer-Ortín 2013, p. 2). Artworking is the “work of mourning” as part of witnessing and healing, central to the co-encounter of the art object, performance and audience (Leoporda, 2013, p. 190) in present and historical time. This is art with a social purpose of connection through difference, empathy and compassionate reconciliation.

Despite not having studied aesthetics in a traditional sense, we have always had a great interest in beauty, aesthetic experience of the everyday and social practices broadly conceived—that is, “far beyond a preoccupation with art or issues of aesthetic appreciation” (Halsall, Jansen & Murphy, 2012, p. 1) or art as a ready-made message. We have eschewed engaging art objects as instrumentally objective, preferring them as intimately evocative. This has been intuitive. It also has been researched and theorized by psychoanalytic writers like Bollas (2009), who suggests we move about everyday in existential relation to “thingness” and “thinking-by-action” where our encounters with all objects (I’s and non-I’s) is itself the employment of “a way of thinking” that is largely unconscious and connected to our pre- and peri-natal aesthetic experiences—“a very different form of thinking from that of cognitive thought” (pp. 92-93).

Although we agree that aesthetic empathy, as Matthew (1997) argued, is essential to critical thinking, a matrixial imaginary radically re-situates both thinking and how we think about empathy—that is, an affective “thinking through things” as Bollas (2009, p. 58) says—a thinking-with(h)nessing through art, as Ettinger might call it.

In general, our experiences of reading about empathy and seeing how it is taught have led to dissatisfaction. It is a conception that seems overly limited in its construction by cognitive thought rather than matrixial thought à la Bollas, Ettinger), and overly ridden by individualist psychological subjectivity and its inevitable fear-based reactive connectivity motivations related to experiencing tragedy and pity.²

In particular, beyond individualist psychology alone, we are most focused on process and a sacred epistemology of relational embodied practice—one that resonates with
Bracha L. Ettinger’s concept of “aesthetic with(n)essing,” where the art/aesthetic object/encounter serves as a transformative conduit for potential empathy, trauma, and/or healing through what she calls com-passion. This com-passion, meaning literally with passion, is the primary experience before empathy, and arguably the earliest form of thought, of a partnership-in-difference with known and unknown others. This is not the typical modern cognitive objectivist western approach to epistemology of which many have argued is insidiously un-com-passionate and abstractly violent itself.4

Ettinger’s matrixial theory takes us deeper into an intimacy that is both nonconscious and conscious, resonating through borderlinkings within a matrixial web/field/imaginary that challenges our current hegemonic social imaginaries.5 In our own words, we interpret matrixial theory:

Matrixial theory, named and developed by Bracha L. Ettinger for over two decades, posits that human subjectivity is fundamentally several, womb-based, and co-relational—a stratum that knows the experience of and carries a template of memory for co-being and co-becoming with the “m/Other”. This theory suggests a real, symbolic and imaginary matrixial web of subtle energetic connections between humans based on the universal prenatal experience, which, if sought out, can be derived intuitively by males and females from co-relational inquiries in art/aesthetic experiences, psychoanalytic practices, and research findings from contemporary object relations developmental psychology.

A few others and ourselves have published on matrixial theory in education (Bickel, 2012a, 2012b; Bickel et al., 2011; Burdick & Thaller, 2012, pp. 19-33; Fisher, 2012, 2013), although this complex theory is unknown to most educators. Our aim in this article is to introduce the matrixial art, theory and biography of Bracha L. Ettinger to the field of education and particularly aesthetic/art education. Her work is a unique, marginal, and potentially powerful way to critique violent relations and enable compassionate relations with the Other. Because she is relatively unknown in education and her technical writing is often overwhelmingly complex and unfamiliar in vocabulary to most readers, we mediate this introduction, as non-technically and aesthetically as possible, through a focus on our own experience as artists working collaboratively in sites of tragedy. In particular, our theoretical explication of Ettinger’s aesthetic with(n)essing offers a complementary aspect to the expansive domains of aesthetics and empathy—yet, we limit our discussion to what theorists have called “aesthetic empathy.”6

Our general implicit guiding question for this inquiry is: What in art and aesthetic experiences of the matrixial, together with aesthetic education, can be offered for ethical understanding and maturation and its concomitant improvement of a non-violent relationship to “the Other”? 
Brief Introduction to Bracha L. Ettinger (1948- )

Ettinger is an eminently recognized artist, psychoanalyst, post-Lacanian theorist and activist living in both Paris and Tel Aviv. Her original and radical matrixial theory has attracted the attention of feminists, philosophers, art historians, artists, cultural theorists and psychoanalysts for more than a decade. Her work offers a critique and complementary knowledge to many fields, though her influence may not be registered on a large-scale (as for e.g., was Freud’s impact) for generations.

Ettinger’s art and theorizing are sensitively informed by her background as a first-generation post-Holocaust survivor. Her careful self-reflective immersion in a serious painting practice led her, in her own words, to “apprehend a matrixial borderspace beyond-the-phallus in the field of experience [subjectivity] and of representation…” (Ettinger in Pollock in Condren, 2010, p. 238). Her first solo exhibition was at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, in 1987, followed by numerous international solo and group exhibitions. Feminist art historian Griselda Pollock began continuous research into Ettinger’s art in the early 1990s. She is arguably Ettinger’s best overall interpreter. To our knowledge to date, no systematic critique of Ettinger’s work has been published.

In 1996, Ettinger received a Ph.D. in Aesthetics of Art from the University of Paris VIII. She received a D.E.A in Psychoanalysis from the University Paris Diderot in 1987, and has been a practicing psychoanalyst since. She began to publish her writing on matrixial theory in 1992 in critical dialogue with numerous philosophers and their work, such as Lyotard, Merleau Ponty, Lévinas, Deleuze and Guattari, Kristeva, Irigaray, Butler, and psychoanalysts and their work, such as Freud, Lacan and Klein (Condren, 2010, p. 237).

When we encountered Ettinger’s work we realized immediately that we had found an artist-theorist with vision and ethical commitment of the scope that feels profound, as the following quotations by eminent scholars suggest.

Griselda Pollock:

With Ettinger’s work we are confronted with the necessity to rework the definition of humanity for our time.... (Pollock, 2011, p. 240); Ettinger’s work is not another chapter in the elaborating field of trauma studies in and beyond the visual arts. It is not about the question of art dealing with traumatic events as witness, or document. It does not enter the debate about non-representation of the unrepresentable. It is an anti-dote, offering, through aesthetic processes a way to shift our understanding of those relations.... (Pollock, 2013, p. 36); Ettinger has utterly transformed the field of that inherited blind spot in psychoanalysis, femininity. The theory of Matrix and metamorphosis resonates with much of what is most difficult and challenging in contemporary culture and advanced philosophies that blasphemously challenge the discrete subject, the boundaries of the body, and distinctions between self and world.... (Pollock, 2006, p. 22.3)
Brian Massumi (2006):

Ettinger’s painting [series] functions to preserve the evanescence of things: their always coming too early to be what they should become, and too late to remain what they would have been.... Ettinger does not paint symbols or associations or representations of things or concepts. She paints belonging and “memory of oblivion.” Directly. In paint, on canvas, materially and unmediated.... (p. 203.4)

Estelle Barrett, a scholar in communication and creative arts, has woven together central non-binary conceptualizations/ontologies of Deleuze and Guattari’s non-Oedipal aesthetic experience and theory with Julia Kristeva’s non-phallic conception of subjectivity, while acknowledging their pivotal valuation and theorizing of becoming woman in a non-phallic sense. Barrett then proceeds to braid Ettinger’s “woman-artist” non-Oedipal matrixial theory with Deleuze and Guattari and Kristeva, in order to articulate a feminine X-principle “that cuts across and disrupts cohesion and fixity of meaning in [phallic] signifying practices” applied to visual texts (Barrett, 2000, p. 253).

Ettinger is a complex postmodern theorist, and yet always reminds us that what she theorizes comes from her artworking and clinical experiences, as well as her diverse relations with her own children and others. It is this maternalistic, holistic, and integral nature of her work that makes it so compelling to our own aesthetic and ethical sensibility as artists, researchers and educators.

Collaborative Art and Aesthetic Wit(h)nessing

One particular art series, from several collaborations we have done over the years is entitled Fear and Desire: A Dialogue (2002). It was created after two powerful emotional incidents in our lives. The first was the event of 9/11/2001 and the second was a severe fire in our housing co-op, which caused our family to be displaced from our home and community for six weeks. Terror ran deep, not only in our family but the whole community, and with 9/11 it was running thick through most who understood it, as a dramatic visual global event and tragedy signifying “the future.”

At the time, Barbara’s artist studio was the most stable refuge for us to work through the traumatic affects and effects of these events. We share the following art (Figures 1 & 2) as examples of artworkings that embody, in our view, what art historian and critic Griselda Pollock called “Aesthetic Wit(h)nessing in the Era of Trauma.” Pollock opens that article quoting Ettinger (2006a):

In art today we are moving from phantasy to trauma. Contemporary aesthetics is moving from the phallic structure to the matrixial sphere. We are carrying, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, enormous traumatic weight, and aesthetic wit(h)nessing in art brings it to culture’s surface. (p. 146)
Pollock (2010) pointed to the demand for theoretical attention to this movement and its problematics:

The understanding of the twentieth century as a century of catastrophe demands theoretical attention be given to concepts such as trauma, as artists with deep ethical commitments bring issues of traumatic legacies to the surface of cultural awareness and potentially provide through the aesthetic encounter a passage from the traces of trauma. (p. 829)

These two quotations above invoke reflection on our own thought processes, ethical commitments and life work in relationship to the role of art and aesthetics today. Our relationship began with a common interest in art, which included the therapeutic encounter, where unconditional attention, exchanged as peers, was primary to the art experience. Yet, the Fear and Desire series was something of another dimension, quite challenging to the core of our being.

We invite readers to attend to the art images presented, linger with them and their own responses, as an aesthetic encounter-event. This requires a willingness to dwell in/ with the art and with(n)essing it as opposed to merely witnessing it from an objective Other location. The process, and patience it demands, asks one to be open to the unexpected and uncanny. Similarly, this willingness is required to understand matrixial theory.

Figure 1: Bickel, B. & Fisher, R.M. (2002). Fear & Desire II, mixed media drawing on wood, 16 x 16 in

Figure 2: Bickel, B. & Fisher, R.M. (2002). Fear & Desire IV, mixed media drawing on wood, 16 x 16 in.

Fear and Desire, as a series of collaborative artworkings aesthetically, represented a foundational tenet of how we understood ourselves in the affective domain: Michael interested in Fear, and Barbara in Desire. We knew fear and desire were pivotal to human
motivation. Our task was to give them unconditional attention in an intense time period of trans(per)formative (Stevens, 2003, ch. 4) action.

We sensed we had to engage in a visual dialogue of art processes, which we were familiar and capable with, because words at that point seemed less able to communicate the arational and irrational feelings and thoughts we were experiencing as traumatic. In fact, words and ideas got in the way of our compassion for each other.

We began with no preconceived ideas for the art we would make. Our focus was on the objects in the studio, including ourselves, in an intimate foreplay of events seeking evocative co-relations. Eventually, we placed large sheets of white paper on the wall, and began to make expressive marks on the paper with diverse drawing and painting materials. We worked vigorously and were impacted by each other’s energy and marks, often crossing boundaries and working into what the other was making—a taboo for many artists.

When exhausted by this initial explosive phase, we ripped the sheets off the wall and shred them into small pieces—an equally satisfying experience. We randomly collaged the paper fragments onto wood panels, creating a dynamic textured ground for our bodies, which we had decided to draw on top. We took turns modeling for each other. Our vulnerable naked bodies were to be essential components. We passed the drawings back and forth many times, continuing to let go of the preciousness of our own marks and directions for the piece, letting go into the spontaneous energies and actions of the mediums. To finish each piece, we pounded metal rivets into the wood and onto our drawn bodies as permanent scar-like forms and metaphors, although not a meaning we cognized at the time. These relational bodies thought-in-art are not recognizably ours personally, but represent feelings and bodies of collective humanity in an era of trauma.

Figure 3: Bickel, B. & Fisher, R. M. (2002). Before Understanding, mixed media drawing on wood, 16 x 16 in.

Figure 4: Bickel, B. & Fisher, R. M. (2002). Crisis of Fear, mixed media drawing on wood, 16 x 16 in.
The series *Fear and Desire* has an overt aesthetic, involving trans-subjective erotic chaos with intense feelings and mourning. It was an attempt to pull torn fragments together in a scene of evocative beauty and order, especially with the embellishment of gold-leafed framing and the words Fear and Desire stenciled lastly onto the drawing surface. As Rudolph Arnheim argued, there seems a basic oppositional (yet complementary) pair of forces dialectically operating in the human psyche—one strives for simplicity/order and the other for discrepancy/disorder (cited in Roald, 2007, p. 67).

The process of naked collaboration, along with the contrasting two words and the experiences that went with them, reflect the tense and conflicting dynamics of the matrixial and phallic spheres and in our life as a couple (see Figures 1 & 2). Yet, the underlying dynamic relation, played with in sadness and joy together, is what is best articulated as an invisible form of caring, of give and take, mutual respect, empathy—individuation and communualization of co-emerging and co-fading, of com-passion.

In the sacred space of the art studio, this deep relational aesthetic wit(h)-nessing held the tension as one-movement, a dance, a flow dynamic—a lemniscate form (infinity symbol), which we had engraved on our wedding rings 10 years prior (Figure 5) as a symbol of our ideal growing creative relationship. We now recognize it as a potent matrixial symbol and metaphor for the dynamic prenatal mother-child matrixial relationship and feminine subjectivity before gender differentiation.

It reminds us of how intimately, from conception, we co-evolve (mother as / and unborn child as non-/I) and instinctively know how to collaborate and stay connected in basic ethical relationality, despite difference, strangeness, madness, chaos and conflict, even if in life’s later development and complexity we may forget how. Emmanuel Lévinas (2001) conceptualized an analogous “originary compassion” (p. 116), somewhat similar to Ettinger’s “primary compassion” or “com-passion.”

![Figure 5: Photoscan of our wedding band with lemniscate form.](image)

Reflecting on this traumatic and healing time (before ever reading Ettinger), we intuitively knew the process of matrixial artworking and aesthetics, and the power of aesthetic wit(h)-nessing. We knew it as more than empathy and merely witnessing each other’s pain and terror as spectator. We knew it was more than feeling pity and fear for each other and victims overall of these tragedies. Rather, we were engaged in respectful, open and vulnerable “self-fragilisation” (Ettinger, 2010, p. 2) with/in creation itself co-shaping the ‘I,’ ‘We’ and ‘non-I’ components of this artworking experience. Delightedly, despite the darkness and negative emotionality of the tragic context of the making, the art/process
carried us beyond the restrictions of trauma, and into a more connected, trusting, healing, transformational and compassionate space with each other and our affected community.

Ettinger’s conceptualization of aesthetic co-encounter as with(h)nessing has expanded our understanding of art in an era of trauma, as intrinsically co-relational, co-empathetic, healing and transformative, ethical and political. Therefore, we embrace and espouse matrixial theory as an essential ground for developments in aesthetic theory and education and the education of “artists for the future.”

Matrixial Imaginary, Proto-ethics, Interpretation, and Empathy

The matrixial is therefore an aesthetical and ethical compassionate environment which is, for each becoming-subject (in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari), the Cosmos.

- Ettinger (2006b, p. 220)

Ettinger’s expansive cosmic, artistic, aesthetic and psychoanalytical inquiries into the deepest relations of self and Other provide us with a much needed matrixial imaginary—one that never forgets the centrality of a prenatal co-relation to development.

Ettinger’s matrixial theory is described by art historian, Pollock (2013), as “an anti-dote, offering, through aesthetic processes a way to shift our understanding of those relations most damaged by the legacies of multiple modern traumatic violations of humanity” (p. 36). This post-Lacanian theory is not created within a paranoid castration story of the phallic imaginary; rather, it is created in the gestating space of the womb, a space of becoming m/Other—a borderlinking space between the mother and fetus, the I and non-I. She argues it “starts before and goes beyond any possibility of empathy” (Ettinger, 2010, p. 15).

The womb, real, symbolic and imaginary, is a natural proto-ethical borderspace of primary compassion that all humans have experienced. We non-consciously know it already before self-conscious I-subjective awareness and phallic-derived cultural and/or religious moral imperatives to do the right thing or to be good or be empathetic to the Other.

Ettinger offers us a way to imagine and think-in-with-com-passionate subjectivity and its proto-ethical paths in post-Freudian and post-Lacanian terms:

The key concept is that of the Matrix, which is, like the Phallus, a signifier, that enlarges and shifts the Symbolic in alignment with a matrixial Imaginary to allow the foreclosed unsignified feminine into signification and thus into thought and affect.

(Pollock, 1998, p. 100)

The problematics of inquiring into the matrixial need to be addressed at the outset. First, Ettinger is creating a matrixial language contra to (yet including) the dominant phallic language. Consequently there are many concepts to understand, perhaps in new ways relative to what we are familiar within the phallic gaze/Imaginary. It would take a semester course to even begin to get a good handle on complex notions of the matrixial
contra-phallic gaze and her total vocabulary and imaginary of the matrixial domain. We are limited to a short introduction and thus, focus only on a few relevant concepts regarding Ettinger’s notion of aesthetic wit(h)nessing.

Secondly, we are aware there are multiple, if not conflicting perspectives, lenses and biases upon which one comes to read and perceive matrixial theory and Ettinger’s aesthetics and artworkings. No one way can be the absolute right way to study and understand matrixial theory. Of course, we’d like readers to become viewers of Ettinger’s art, which can be found on the Internet and in articles and books, as well as to read her original writing, and the writing of those who study her work. We also know from experience that her art, much less her texts and others writing on her work, can be quite difficult to read and understand. The problem of interpretation arose in our dialogical inquiry in preparation for this article:

M: Barbara, you and I (with a group of others internationally located) have been studying Ettinger’s writing and lectures for over two years. I don’t know about you, but her discourse style and elaborate vocabulary (steeped in psychoanalysis) is quite off-putting and sometimes just darn difficult. How do you, as someone not trained in that discourse or that interested, negotiate Ettinger’s tome of theorizing on the matrixial? Any advice for others, whom are in a similar dilemma like yourself?

B: She has done so much writing. There’s lots out there to choose from. At times, she writes specifically for the psychoanalytic community and other times for the artist, or for mothers or woman’s issues. Not all of her writing is going to resonate with a particular reader, depending on what one’s dominant lens or interest is. There’s enough of her work written about in the Art World, written by art writers, critics and historians to get a feel for it. And definitely psychoanalysis has impacted the Art World as well as the Education World, so she does cross disciplines. And, what we’ve learned from the cyber study group is that it is helpful if people are coming with their own art and aesthetic practices and processes, so we can hang the theory onto our own experiences and practices.

M: And those may not necessarily be sophisticated art or aesthetic practices, they could be something really basic, like cooking, or taking photographs, knitting or other happenings. It doesn’t have to be a refined process or product, nor do they need to be art professionals.

B: Or even in someone’s research practice, how they are carrying out their research.

Bringing their own experience to it. Putting actual experience onto the theory helps us understand, because she is creating a new language. It’s a matrixial language, and it’s foreign, and it’s coming from her synthesis of psychoanalysis and art, also being multi-lingual herself. It’s very complex, and also being translated across languages.

M: Across languages?

B: She has written in Hebrew, French and English and her first book, The Matrixial Borderspace, was translated from French into English.
M: Because matrixial theory is so relational, as she and others have said, do you think reading and studying it is almost essential to do in groups?

B: I think it is very helpful. You can go so far on your own, but because it is so rich and complex and has so many layers, the more voices and lenses you have coming at it, and the more articulations of “Oh, I see it from my perspective this way”, the better you’ll understand it. And you also have to come in and be willing to let go of cherished preconceptions about aesthetics, ethics and your phallic lens, which we all carry—and to let go of that temporarily, and to open up to this unknown known other, the matrixial dimension through Ettinger’s lenses.

M: Many dimensions, all right. In my experience in the study group, you know phallic is always a little hard to articulate easily, we could say many things. But one thing often a phallic lens can bring to a theory or studying someone’s work—there’s almost a competition to get to the correct interpretation of a text or theory—a scrambling for “what’s the right one?” And a certain authoritative, valid, phallic kind of “mine is most right” is probably operating below the surface or overtly. That’s not the best lens to bring to good hermeneutics. And I think what you are talking about, and my experience in the group is certainly validating, in the beginning stages, or after years of study even, is that we have to be really open to what it is that we experience in/with that theory, rather than trying to get the theory accurate and then being competitive with others in that learning process.

B: And to know that her definitions change, they’re not static, because they have so many layers to them. And it doesn’t make an earlier definition wrong or inaccurate, it’s just evolving or returning. Matrixial language is a living language she is creating and the definitions are more meanings or “living organisms,” and it doesn’t mean that the old definitions/meanings are lost. So it can get very complex.

Although there is no one right way to understand matrixial theory, one will not go far in accurately understanding matrixial theory if one does not attempt to step outside the dominant phallic lens or gaze. How do we get outside of, or at least beyond, that dominating gaze and its inherent aesthetic configurations so as to not have it distort or appropriate that which we are searching for, we hope, with an engaged matrixial sensibility? One ought to expect the venture to be challenging, if not disorienting, and potentially transformative. The matrixial gaze and aesthetic inevitably calls us to a general mindfulness, generosity, intimacy, empathy, compassion, if not healing. Arguably, such are not the characteristic traits of the generic phallic gaze or aesthetic.

In our own words, as woman-artist, Ettinger’s matrixial theory makes the case, based on developmental theories (e.g., object relations, feminist psychology) and her critical aesthetic practices, that an archaic feminine and feminist, maternal and relational lens is the best approach to understand the pre/trans-subjective experiencing and mutual co-evolution of the / and non-/I relationships and thus, the ethical-self, of which the prenatal child-mother matrixial relationship is the foundational connection and psychic ontological ground.
We’ll attempt to fuzzily articulate a few concepts briefly before elaborating aesthetic wit(h)nessing as a braiding conception for matrixially-based understanding of empathy. Can we empathize with an object, matrixially? We’ll start with Ettinger’s view of art with an engaged viewer as an encounter-event and potential “matrixial alliance.”9 Ettinger (2006) wrote,

The viewer is challenged by the artwork to join a specific matrixial borderspace, to join an alliance, an anonymous intimacy. Beyond representation, s/he is carried by an event s/he did not necessarily experience, and through the matrixial web an unexpected transformation and reaction to that event arises. That is why, I believe, aesthetic production already carries ethical aspects, even without the artist’s consideration or will…. [p. 150.1]

Utilizing the evocation of prenatal matrixial borderspace as a feminine/ feminist foundation for relationality of I’s, partial-I’s, and non-I’s [subjective-objective borderlinks], she conceptualizes the matrixial as “an Encounter-Event… that becomes a borderlinking string and a subjectivizing agency that leaves unconscious traces as a thread… in-between the I and non-I [and partial I’s]” [Ettinger, 2010, p. 12]. Pollock (2004) elaborates:

Bracha Ettinger invites us to consider aspects of subjectivity as encounter occurring at shared borderspaces [i.e., liminal zones] between several partial subjects [co-affecting partners], never entirely fused not totally lost, but sharing and processing, within difference, elements of each unknown other. [p. 7]

Whether it is Ettinger’s art, embedded around and within the Holocaust, or our art of traumatizing events like a house fire or 9/11, the relational, sacred, and matrixial aesthetic practices we bring to these event-encounters change the nature of the art and the borderlinking potentials with all involved in these events, be they in the far or near past.

For us, in the Fear and Desire series, we utilized a visual-aesthetic dialogue approach involving our bodies with the intention to non-judgmentally attend and wit(h)ness with curiosity anything that came up in the process. As well, to interpret all within an aesthetic-ethical registration of markings upon and within those bodies-in-joint immediate referral (“moment of jointness”)10 to our collaboration and responsibility to each other’s healing.

Borderlinking strings of an invisible and sometimes visible nature connect us and humanity in struggle, of which the rational, logical, quotidian registrations of thought and words are too meager to elucidate our changing subjectivities-in-trauma-in-beauty, and with each other in wit(h)nessing these event-encounters in the world and in the art studio. Our collaborative artworkings changed our subjectivities as individuals, as a couple, as victims, as artists—it changed in a positive way our relationality to the Other to one of less fear and more desire.

We believe an encounter with our art may have similar impacts with audiences, especially, though without guarantee, if the viewer enters an aesthetic wit(h)nessing with each art piece, and attunes [consciously and unconsciously] to the borderlinking strings of
vibrations of energy and memories and ties that connect us all to m/Other and to the real traumatics in the 21st century.

Each viewer, like each artist, depending on conditions of the environment, will connect and/or disconnect, in pleasure and/or pain, in beauty and/or ugliness, from these borderlinkings in the matrixial web. Each, artist and audience participant, will bring a particular amount and quality of unconditional attention to the event-encounter, and sometimes, will be transperformed in the encounter to produce a synergic and catalytic unconditional attention for all.

Art and art history are replete with notions of art works that function to convey a message that is within the artist and the viewers’ attempts to decode them, and in some cases add their own meaning to the art object. This is not the case with Ettinger’s matrixial theory and aesthetics: “The artwork is thus to be understood not as the vehicle for a pre-created message.”11 As matrixial artists, our task is to create the particular borderspaces, architectures and mediators for co-affecting partnerships where it is not possible to not share, as Ettinger often repeats in her theorizing. Pollock (2011) calls this a radical move toward “art as compassion” altering traditional notions of aesthetics:

Certain kinds of feminist thought and its aesthetic practice can contribute to fundamental changes. This art and practice does it through activating the ethical responsiveness to all others via the aesthetic as the site of an elaboration [re-performing] of an encounter event that itself stimulates us to thought. The idea of the aesthetics is hereby also transformed for our time, when the project of abstraction encompasses borderlinking and resonance to question the trace and color as light. It is here that a radically new possibility occurs: art as compassion. (p. 240).... [and Ettinger (2006) adds:] Perhaps the idea of wit(h)ness-Thing is leading us toward a contemporary transformation of the scope of aesthetics itself. (p. 150.1)

Ettinger often notes she is hesitant to talk about beauty in a traditional rationalistic cognitive framing, yet, concludes: “fragilizing yourself... this beauty is the effect of borderlinking to a wound and co-emerging with an-other [Ettinger, 1998]. Aesthetic wit(h)nessing, in the matrixial sense, is an act of relational beauty [less attentive to formal aesthetic principles]—a co-creation of beauty that cannot be limited to the pleasurable qualities of objects and subjects, but that is rather an assemblage of the processes of the unpredictable encounter event. If one was to ask us if we thought our art work was beautiful (e.g., as in Figures 1 - 4), we would answer “yes” but then we would have to articulate a notion of feminine matrixial beauty-in-trauma and invoke Ettinger’s theorizing to help articulate our answer.

Moving beyond the discussion of matrixial and ethical beauty here, we’ll focus on empathy and compassion. Ettinger (2010) offers key distinctions:

I have named full empathy the empathy within the matrixial sphere which is empathy within compassion. I have named empty empathy the compassionless empathy... as a way to emphasise the pathologising potentiality embedded in the attitude of empathy [per se].... (p. 13)
Pollock (2013) adds:

Com-passion is the legacy and gift, and the potential trauma, as well as its means of alleviation, of human creation in the sexual specificity of the feminine, which means a primordial severality whose promise is always awaiting post-natal occasions of recurrence, prime amongst which is what we know as the aesthetic event. The aesthetic event is thereby turned into an ethical event insofar as it fosters humanising com-passion and response-ability towards the other, or the events or trauma of the other that I do not know. (p. 36)

The com-passion, prior to the capacity of empathy, of a healthy maternal subjectivity, “works inside the subject by inspiration,” signaling “contact and connection, yet is not reactive” inciting “primary affective awe” beyond fear-shame and fear-guilt forms of reactive connectivity [Ettinger, 2010, p. 1], the latter, which infuse most initiatives of empty empathy, ethical guides and moral rules derived within the phallic paradigm.

Ettinger theorizes in this full empathy and maternal feminine subjectivity the counterbalance necessary for a “psychic potential for subjective freedom” [Ettinger, 2010, p. 1] and “transsubjective coemergence” of subjectivities borderlinked, as in maternal gestation, in a similar patient and generous time-space as pregnancy. From this matrixial imaginary Ettinger points to “empathy-within-respect” for m/Other and “empathy-within-compassion” (p. 7) as anti-dotes to empty and pathological empathy per se.

So what is the problem with empathy per se that Ettinger critiques? First, it is too often non-healing, nor the best path to naturally arising com-passion. Empathy, as psychologically conceived as putting oneself in another’s shoes, is already far too rationalistic and individualistic, too phallic and too moralistic for matrixial theory/ethics. It tends to assume a known Other and excludes the potential borderlinking with non-I’s and not-known-others and the archaic m/Other of the matrixial web. Empathy, thus, psychologically conceived in the phallic gaze is too reductionistic, and even violent—for example when “m/Other respect” is excluded, leaving too many therapists to dis-respect the matrixial and m/Other (i.e., maternal, and parental subjectivities) in their patient’s life.12

Thomas Homer-Dixon, a current leader in conflict theory and the study of dehumanization, discussed the problem of empathy as partial and too often mis-conceived as a solution to dehumanization. In fact, he notes that (a less than fulll) empathy, on its own, is utilized pathologically by torturers to enhance the effectiveness of their torturing because they want to know the other person’s thoughts, values, feelings intimately to ensure their violence is effective for that unique individual.13 This certainly disturbs our view of empathy as a blanket positive term when it is void of roots in com-passion and respect.

In re-visioning full empathy, with a matrixial nuance and emphasis on self-fragilization, as we both experienced in the Fear and Desire series, Ettinger moves the concept into the feminine paradigm as complementary to the current phallic-based psychological
paradigm. She adds a particular ethical imperative to empathy with her constructions of “empathy-within-respect,” as respect for the m/Other of all relations (known and unknown) and “empathy-within-compassion,” as the required full empathy of aesthetic wit(h)nessing capacity, enabling healing through trauma. In contrast to traditional views, these assertions enable a notion of empathy that is relatively less phallic, rational, individualistic and more feminine, feminist, aesthetic, borderlinking, and ultimately non-violent.

A Cautionary for Art/Aesthetic Education

If art, and particularly matrixial art and aesthetic re-visioning is to have an impact in future aesthetic/art education, it will be important to turn questions of beauty into another (m/Other, feminine) register than what we are typically use to. Following Ettinger, we are asked to conceptualize and wit[h]ness matrixial beauty-in-trauma, letting art lead the process of thought and analysis.

Regarding our own art works presented in this article, rather than merely asking if our art is beautiful, the more important matrixial pedagogical question for us would be if the questioner/critic was willing to turn the question upon her or himself and search for what “beauty” means in the context of the encounter with the aesthetic of our art work and our art relational processes in the context of an era of trauma. That would be more demanding of one’s attention and empathy upon the questioner/critic and upon us as artists—to wit[h]ness us and our art in an aesthetic dialogue on and of beauty itself, without pre-given meanings or looking for a symbolic message per se. I would also suggest that “the canon” of references for beauty may be totally inappropriate.

Ettinger’s (2000) theorizing warns us that even though art may be a “transport station for trauma” (pp. 91-116) and potential healing and transformation for one or more participants in the matrixial web of borderlinkings, it may also lead to fragile co-relations and emergences and those may become co-fading separations. There is always risk of re-stimulation of trauma for any of those involved, or at least leaving us with a non-fulfillment of connection that doesn’t last.

Being ethical, phallic or matrixial, is not always free of potential negative outcomes; but it does mean one attempts to stay conscious of the potential risks, and bring creative contingencies for optimizing positive results to the event encounter, as best one is able. In our experience, aesthetic and art processes are one of the more effective transports and creative contingencies for trauma work and the extending and maturing of affective, cognitive and moral capacities to integrate differences (the Other) in our lives in non-violent ways.

First and foremost, good aesthetic/art education would encourage and engage primary com-passion and prenatal development research into curriculum and pedagogical
designs. Ettinger argues such com-passion “starts before and goes beyond any possibility of empathy”—a proto-ethical and proto-empathetic path. Learning the feminine relational full empathy and connection between all things can be assisted by reestablishing borderspaces of our primal matrixial imaginary and borderlinks, which is the root source of our first experiences as a prenatal being with the m/Other. It is where reciprocal co-being and co-becoming empathy-in-respect and compassion of the m/Other toward the not-yet-I (stranger)—her offspring—is relatively benign, trustable and non-violent, though never perfect or completely predictable.

Matrixial theory suggests that we are compassionate beings in a matrixial imaginary but held after birth in a continually expansive and dominant phallic imaginary/world, where paranoia due to separation and fragmentation (wounding and fear) rules. This is a political problem of traumatization itself. This is the condition for terrorization of many forms, feeding off of paranoia embedded in the phallic imaginary. If we live in an era of trauma, and there is a trauma paradigm that is essential as context to our lives and how we educate, then a matrixial imaginary offers a corrective aesthetics to ethics to political deconstruction and reconstruction in that hierarchical order of development, where an action-based “politics of desire” (not fear) rules.  

Matrixial theory suggests we have to think differently about thinking itself and thinking-the-aesthetic in the context of trauma. Aesthetic/art education can offer an effective counter-hegemony and critical re-thinking, reconnection and concomitant change and transformation of the way we perceive the world and live in/with it. Aesthetic/art education, informed by matrixial theory, can offer a way to reconceptualize beauty, empathy, learning, and help us understand more imaginatively the nature and causes of trauma, paranoia and terrorism.
References


Endnotes

1. Our preference is a wide-open definition for art and artist, but also one that discerns criticality and quality [if not "greatness"] by what Otto Rank and Anäis Nin [Nin, 1932/89] address in terms of non-conformist art relative to the mass collectivization process of institutions and socialization—and that, ultimately the great artist is one who makes their life art in an ethical way for a purpose beyond ego-based individualism, commercial success, careerism and heroic exploits. We also do not claim to make art or artist out to be an ideal-type and totally resistant to context or free from being polluted by the same mass collectivization forces [e.g., "Art World" markets and elitism]. Our view somewhat parallels the mature artist Marina Abramovic, who recently presented the WSJ Artist Innovator of the Year Award to Chinese socially-engaged artist Ai Weiwei, whom she called "the artist of the future." Abramovic’s speech for the award ended with citing Weiwei’s own words: “I spent most of my effort liberating myself from being an artist to become a real human being” (Abramovic, 2012).

2. Technical distinctions between Ettinger’s matrixial aesthetic empathy notions and classical W. Aristotelian [a la Martha Nussbaum] empathy related to tragedy and catharsis are large topics beyond the scope of this article.

3. According to Denzin (2009), “A sacred, existential epistemology places humans in a non-competitive nonhierarchical relationship to the earth, to nature, and to the larger world. This sacred epistemology stresses the values of empowerment, shared governance, care, solidarity, love, community, covenant, morally involved observers, and civic transformation. This ethical epistemology recovers the moral values that were excluded by the rational Enlightenment science project. This sacred epistemology is based on a philosophical anthropology that declares that ‘all humans are worthy of dignity and sacred status without exception” [Christians 1995: 129].... [and] recognizes and interrogates the ways in which race, class, and gender operate as important systems of oppression in the world today” (p. 300).

4. Our view is not to say all cognitive thought or western epistemology is violent, but most of it is; of which alternative conceptualizations have been offered for example, see (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1992). We draw attention to their analysis of "The Cartesian Anxiety" (and its violence) in chapter 7. In general, Ettinger makes similar claims regarding the fear-based violence of the phallic as foundational to W. epistemology, although such a detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

5. Although “social imaginary” is a complex term, theorized by many theorists, we follow more or less Cornelius Castoriadis’s view, after Jacques Lacan, where individual and collective psyche are interwoven as reality-meaning-making processes within a “mutual realization” of social imagining, practicing within a structural institutional matrix via inter-relational present and historical contexts. Social imaginary largely determines what we tend to imagine and what we are allowed to imagine. Our assumption, with many other thinkers, is that the phallic (masculine) dominates the current western social imaginary (with its many imaginaries). See Moore (2007, p. 60) for a good description of Castoriadis’s social imaginary notion.

6. We acknowledge many authors [e.g., Lugliani, 1997; Tomarken, 2009, chpt. 8] particularly in the field of literary criticism, have utilized this term “aesthetic empathy,” each with their own meanings and variations. For this article, we use the German psychologist Theodor Lipps primarily in his meaning of the term, taken from Townsend’s [2010, pp. 108-09] and Roald’s [2007, p. 68] synopses.

7. In the mid-late 1990s, Michael conceived of a sacred warrior process of 24 hr. healing journeys, which were offered to peers and the public at-large. The basic structure was
to offer unconditional attention [wit(h)nessing] for a full day in the home of the one who receives the attention. There is no other agenda although arts--based methods were often used. Upon reflection, these were art performances or encounter events as much as healing performances or encounter events.


9. Ettinger acknowledges that the womb is not an organ or origin absolute in her theory but a shared psychic borderspace and it may not always be congenial to sharing trauma or healing but it can play a creative role in “matrixial alliances” (as paraphrased in Leporda, 2013, p. 189).

10. According to Pollock (2004, p. 8), Ettinger argues this specificity of the affected body-psyche co-emerging with the other and the world, is a sexual specificity of the feminine that every subject has, whether they enact it fully or not, and from that, are possibilities of “eroticized imprints” as distinctive “moments of jointness” similar to those in the later stages of pregnancy and the defining characteristic of what Ettinger calls “severality.”

11. Pollock (2010, pp. 859-60) noted: “It [the artwork] is instead a screen on which this event—personal [from the inside] or historical [from the outside], from past and present—is projected and unconsciously shaped. Towards this screen [itself a created borderspace] the viewer inclines without knowing the event that has made the work emerge. This borderspace that is opened can, none the less, generate affects and responsiveness that is in part coming from in me, and unknown other to this work and its event, and from the others and the histories I carry, known or unknown. The aesthetic event is thus an encounter of bits and pieces of many subjects, past and present, known and unknown whose effect is like a vibrating string that transmits affects to each of its anchoring parts. These affects and even meanings have something in common, but are not the same. Their effect is to bring these disparate subjective entities into poetic and creative co-emergence at this threshold of creation. The artwork is thus understood as an event; it is also a (potential) encounter. The encounter may not happen for every viewer. No one can predict the outcome.... But the invitation is there to make one’s own borders fragile enough to register the being, pain our jouissance of the other and not attempt to master it as an object or a communication.”

12. Ettinger (2010) writes extensively about the problems with psychological therapy today and ethical issues relating to the therapy room. These crucial topics are beyond the scope of our article.


14. Ettinger often talks about this as exemplified in the 2009 symposium in London, UK, with Judith Butler entitled “Bracha Ettinger: Aesthetics/Ethics/Political.” A similar argument has been made by Sandoval (2000), and in particular see her discussion of “politics of desire” by Foucault in which Foucault starts off with the essential how-to list with: “Free political action from all unitary and totalizing paranoia” [i.e., fear-based operations] (pp. 164-65).