

Irmgard Emmelhainz
**Shattering and
Healing**

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e-flux journal #96 — January 2019 Irmgard Emmelhainz
Shattering and Healing

My love,

How did we get to live in a world where the destruction of lives is now an instrument for “necro-empowerment” and bodies are not only merchandise (as in the times of slavery) but disposable instruments of violence? I suspect that the condition of possibility for these phenomena is the pervasiveness of detachment from each other and our cultivated capacity to dissociate from our bodies and from everything else surrounding us. Numbed toward ourselves and others, we fully believe that our self-worth derives from this irrational feeling of self-reliance, perhaps nurtured by our mothers since birth.¹ An example of this could be the Ferber method, which “teaches” babies to self-soothe by letting them cry themselves to sleep in their crib. This early programming to self-rely is accompanied by a conception of the body as a rational machine. Obligated to repress our own vulnerability, we become detachable from our bodies, each other, and the world. This phenomenon can be thought of as parallel to the Western ideal of a search for totality, premised on the fictitious unity of the subject. But somehow I suspect that subjectivity is always already fragmented and dislocated, and that the fragments get shattered by this series of constitutive separations and incessant dislocations, which are the pain of not being grounded on earth along with the pain of social dismemberment. And yet we do live by the ideal that a self is or can become whole by overcoming brokenness, or finding love. Some even choose to believe that self-shattering can be emancipatory, as in radical queer acts of social, psychic, and epistemological disruption. Queering has thus come to mean shattering “normal” or given gender identities and erecting communities with impermanent links, without the promise of a new sociality or identity. But what does it mean to self-liquefy when your self is already shattered, when the violence of gender and gender violence are forms of subjection in themselves?²

So perhaps instead of self-liquefying (further), we need to come to terms with our own brokenness and vulnerability. I’m not thinking about *subjectification*, which implies a textual position, an interpellation, cultural appropriation, political positioning even; nor about subjectification as reinventing oneself through a mix of libidinal drive and neoliberal mandate to find ways to adapt and stay competitive in the ever-in-flux liberalized market. When I think about what it would mean to learn to live with our own fragmentation and shattering, I am reminded of a recipe for repairing that I heard once: when a tool is damaged to the point that it can no longer be used, it needs to burn red-hot and then be

*How
to
tell
a
shattered
story?*

*By
slowly
becoming
everybody*

No.

By slowly becoming everything.

—Arundathi Roy¹

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Photo:Lesley/www.pexels.com

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smoothed out so the damaged part can be removed by submerging it in water. This water can be drunk – you should actually drink the story of the damage and repair it; if you have faith, you can even heal the source of the damage. Afterward, you can give the broken part a new function or purpose. While this recipe is for repairing iron tools, healing by “drinking the story” and repurposing the damaged part might also work as a strategy for embracing our own shattering. Through a sort of cathartic separation from the damaged part, we can cleanse ourselves and then commune with the remains.

But what does vulnerability actually mean? Is it being able to acknowledge a state of pain or insecurity, embracing the feeling of coming undone? I feel that it’s something I’ve tried to hide from others and from myself. At the cost of headaches, a bloated stomach, the inability to articulate a sentence. A mental-physical feeling of paralysis. I now suspect that people spend a lot of time and effort hiding in this way. Could I overcome my terror of falling apart if I allowed myself to rely on others, on you? Or should I be a “cruel optimist” and create hopeful and positive attachments, in full awareness that they will not work out?³ Every option seems too difficult, because the tiniest and seemingly most harmless threat of exposure that I perceive pulls me down into a spiral of terror. Or used to. Now I can handle these things much better, and you know it. At some point I was inspired by Chris Kraus and other feminists to embrace anonymous S&M sex. I wanted to experience it as a way to practice vulnerable empowerment. Sadoomasochism is a situation in which the dominated puts herself in the hands of the dominator, but is also empowered through the safe word. I thought this would be an interesting way to experiment with a sense of both vulnerability and strength – being in pain, but at the same time in control. But is this not the same as loving and being open to building together by performing fearless acts of love and by fearlessly accepting love?

From this place it then becomes possible to treat vulnerability as a healed scar, a patch of tissue that is still sensitive in certain parts. The scar is nothing other than the visceral command to become a self-detached individual who can efficiently manage her own human capital. And what makes that scar heal is not turning inward or isolating ourselves, but opening outward, reaching out to others. Capitalism has prompted us to dream of an ideal individual who can be or is in control of everything. But none of us can be in control. Because we only really exist *being-with*. We must learn to trust others to make decisions on how to get organized, on what is needed, on what we want – as opposed to

organization as a clash of interests and unwilling compromise, as in democracy. Trusting others through consensus means giving oneself to others in reaching an agreement on what it is best for everyone.

I’ve come to understand your passion for diving as a hunger for intimacy. As you linger, fish suddenly stop seeing you as an intruder and welcome you into their world. It helps you fill your own void. I can’t wait to try it. Maybe motherhood was my way to fill my own void. I identify with these words Leanne Simpson wrote about motherhood and healing: “when gezhizhawzh needed to heal, and renew herself, she had learned to mother. the stability and rhythm of a new life filled her up. the constant physical contact. the love. the birth ceremony was renewal in itself. no wonder men had to work to not become lost.”⁴

So I have established that vulnerability is not a wound but the scar of individualism. One problem is that in our contemporary world, being seen and being exposed overlaps with the current practice of self-marketing. But I’m talking about self-exposure of the heart (not Lena Dunham’s narcissistic self-exposure, and not terrorist self-exposure). Vulnerability as an acknowledgment of the desire for intimacy. So after a long, difficult road, I have come to learn to lie in you like land lies in water. Shadowed green in between, shallows at the edges. A line of seaweed, where the land leans down to lift – or tug – the sea from under.⁵

x

To Pip Day. Thank you to my friend Ruth Ovseyevitz for helping out with my reproductive tasks so I could finish this text.

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4
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5
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from Elizabeth Bishop’s poem
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