

Using Transformative Encounters

Paula McCloskey

With a genuine encounter [...] our typical ways of being in the world are challenged, our systems of knowledge disrupted. We are forced to thought. The encounter then operates as a rupture in our habitual modes of being and thus in our habitual subjectivities. It produces a cut, a crack. However this is not the end of the story, for the rupturing encounter also contains a moment of affirmation, the affirmation of a new world, in fact a way of seeing and thinking this world differently. This is the creative moment of the encounter that obliges us to think otherwise. Life, when it truly is lived, is a history of these encounters, which will always necessarily occur beyond representation.¹

Several years ago I had a particular encounter with the oeuvre of Louise Bourgeois. I have come to think of this encounter as being *transformative*, where there was a transmission of something, a passing on. I remember this event as an occurrence that would help create a space to contemplate my life's trajectory to that point and which would also ultimately lead to a body of research that explores art encounters alongside maternity and subjectivity. This text considers this potentially transmissive encounter and raises questions relating to art's potentiality as a host, having affective and effective possibilities.

Stranger

I came to art when I was an adult, as a relative stranger. I stumbled across the art of Louise Bourgeois in the aftermath of a turbulent time in my life. I was in my mid-twenties and had been unhappy for many years. Importantly, I had recently given birth to my son. The birth was a 'tipping point'. Up until this time I had what I think of as a difficult early life, which included a 'disrupted' maternity. My matrilineage bears witness to a history of 'disrupted' or 'lost' maternities. I wanted my baby; however, a combination of complex factors, events, and relationships collided, which rendered my confidence in myself as a mother shattered. At one point I actually thought it would be better for my son to be predominantly cared for by someone else.

Maternity is a complex concept, fraught with complexities, contradictions, and paradoxes. My maternity involves a lived experience that is peculiar to me. Some of the particular challenges that I faced may not be generalisable to other mothers; however, maternity is something that is experienced by all of us, being cared for, being mothered, being birthed, being a mother, being a father. It is a relational concept that we share, to a lesser or greater extent. Lisa Baraitser discusses how maternity can be thought of as a very particular subjective category: 'The condition of being singular and multiple simultaneously, while being figured in the feminine'.² Baraitser's understanding of the specificity of the maternal subjective is not to be understood as a pregnant subjectivity, but as an ethical set of post-birth relations with the post-birth child as radically Other, which 'establishes this relationship as ethical'.³ In the process of grappling with the strangeness of the Other of my child (a fuller analysis of which is beyond the scope of this paper), I stumbled across another Other-stranger in the art of Louise Bourgeois. Having subsequently reflected on the experience, I returned to the understanding that this art encounter moved me and with it something changed, something was transmitted, which altered not only my maternal-self, but also my relation to art, and in broader terms still, I was transformed.

Friend

I first saw Louise Bourgeois' work in a magazine – reproduced images of her work and some text about that work. I was instantly drawn to the images of the cells (e.g. *Cell XVIII (Portrait)*, 2000), drawings (e.g. *Altered States*, 1992), her spiders, the pictures and sculptures of *Femme Maison*. I was moved by how the form translated an energy to me, an emotion with which I could connect. I found

the images sinister in many ways, but also strong, bold, questioning, defiant. The *affective* nature of this event, as being part of a trans-situational process, led to a sense of possibility, of something new, of something different. In the images it was not I nor my maternity that I recognised (although maternity can be traced as a theme in her work⁴); there was strangeness, an Otherness. However, there was some recognition; the images transmitted to me feelings of being trapped, as well as ambivalence, a feeling that I had experienced with my own maternity. The images allowed access to a maternal part of me that was so hidden, so untouchable, that by this encounter-event I felt jolted. It is perhaps by-the-by as to whether Bourgeois's work might be read generally maternal or not, for it is the connecting to the maternal (my maternal) through the specificity of the encounter that is relevant here.⁵

Host

In the years that followed the encounter with her art I acted with fidelity to this event. I changed my trajectory in a myriad of ways. In the subsequent contemplation of this encounter I asked questions: Can art be so affective? Is there any evidence or manifestation for this outside the realm of my own experience? Of course I had anecdotal exemplars; people have always cited instances of being moved by music, a particular painting, poetry, and so on. But I wanted to go further, to think about the subjectivising potential of art-encounters and the implications for this thinking not only for art, but for subjectivity too. In thinking of the potentially affective potential of art, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write:

Art wants to create the finite that restores the infinite: it lays out a plane of composition that, in turn, through the action of aesthetic figures, bears monuments or composite sensations.⁶

This plane of composition involves the isolation of the affect and percept from the ordered world and then allows an opening into the infinite through the action of its monuments or sensations. The work of art, its style, can be seen as a selection of the plane of composition. As a plane of composition the art is sense experience, a place where the virtual is in becoming the (immanent) actual:

The virtual then names a real place but one which is yet to be actualised. Whereas the real and the possible instigate a philosophy of transcendence, the virtual and the actual affirm immanence. We might rephrase this and say that whereas the possible names a logic of Being (ontology of stasis), the virtual affirms a logic of becoming (ontology of process). Indeed, it is only with, and within, the virtual that we have pure difference in and of itself (we might call this an original complexity, pure multiplicity, a liquid being, or simply the realm of the undifferentiated). The virtual, or rather the actualisation of the virtual, is then the creative act – precisely the production, or actualisation, of difference and thus diversity from a pre-existing field of potentialities.⁷

The work of art, then, can be seen as a monument of the virtual and chaomic; in these terms it has the potential to bring forth a *becoming* world and to catalyse transformation. In this sense, the work of Louise Bourgeois could be viewed as a hospitable monument, with a 'multiplicity of sensations' which draw together a multiplicity of others (sensations, experiences, and so on). Each person then comes to the work differently and each may be *affected* differently, but with every encounter comes the potential to foster the production of new existential territories, new refrains of life.⁸

It seems that the potential to be *transformed* lies with the potential to be *affected*. What does *affect* mean in this context? Affect can be described as a combination of the first empirical perception and the 'network of association and feeling evoked by this particular sensory event'.⁹ Affect is then a pre-personal event where sense and perception have a subjectifying power as new affective connections

open to the world outside of the *I*.¹⁰ For Guattari, the power of the affect is that it separates from subject and object and as such harnesses the consistency of an affective refrain.¹¹ Guattari refers to this potential of the ‘polyphony of *subjectivation*’ as *existential refrains*,¹² and this conjures up the ideas that paths are opened and time is reconfigured, releasing the potential for new affective relations outside of the *I* to Others, locating the subjectifying potential of art encounters as a relational process.

Guattari cites different affective examples of the refrain. One accessible example of this is his use of the television to explore how a refrain might work in the process of catalysing subjectivity:

When I watch television, I exist at the intersection: 1. of a perceptual fascination provoked by the screen’s luminous animation which borders on the hypnotic. 2. of a captive relation with the narrative content of the program, associated with a lateral awareness of surrounding events (water boiling on the stove, a child’s cry, the telephone...), 3. of a world of fantasms occupying my daydreams. My feeling of personal identity is thus pulled in different directions. How can I maintain a relative sense of unicity, despite the diversity of components of *subjectivation* that pass through me? It’s a question of the refrain that fixes me in front of the screen, henceforth constituted as a projective existential node. My identity has become that of the speaker, the person who speaks from the television.¹³

In the example of television, it is not so much a process of subjectification, but one of de-singularisation. But if a refrain can affect us in such a way as de-singularisation, then what of the quality of a complex refrain that interrupts our daily habits, that ruptures our lives by way of an encounter-event, such as the art-encounter described? The multivalent quality of the refrain, which ‘transforms’ and ‘opens paths’, alongside the idea of Guattari’s aesthetic paradigm could develop a way to think of art-encounters as being a *complex affective* refrain where opportunities are created to be affected, to be taken away from our habitual selves; when the virtual can become the actual. This potential of art-encounters is returned to again and again by Guattari in his writing:

This poetic-existential catalyst that we find at work in the midst of scriptural vocal, musical or plastic discursivities engages quasi-synchronously the enunciative crystallisation of the creator, the interpreter and the admirer of the work of art, like analyst and patient. Its efficiency lies in its capacity to promote active, processual ruptures within semiotically structured, signification and denotative networks, where it will put emergent subjectivity to work [...]¹⁴

Guattari gives the Proustian example of an affective refrain with the ‘little phrase’ of Vinteuil’s sonata, which Swann associates with his love of Odette:¹⁵

But the little phrase, as soon as it struck his ear had the power to liberate in him the space that was needed to contain it; the proportions of Swann’s soul were altered; a margin was left for an enjoyment [*jouissance*] that corresponded no more than for Odette to any external object and yet was not, like his enjoyment of that love, purely individual, but assumed for him a sort of reality superior to that of concrete things. [Translator’s parentheses]¹⁶

Guattari explores the affect of ‘deep red color’ of his curtain as a refrain:

Affect speaks to me, or at least it speaks through me. The deep red color of my curtain enters into an existential constellation with the falling night, in the twilight hour between dog and wolf, engendering an affect of uncanniness that devalues all the clarities and urgencies pressing upon me just moments before, to plunge the world into a seemingly irremediable emptiness.¹⁷

The *affect* as something that speaks, as something of the Other, helps to develop an understanding of how the experience of art is not one of merely a subject-object relation; it is a

complex meeting where there is a passing through and to, where something might be transmitted, where our daily existence can be interrupted, and thereafter new worlds can be accessed. In thinking of art as potentially acting as a complex refrain, it seems that the refrain's role in the production of subjectification is that they emerge from problematic affects that have a *machinic* composition and are thus autonomous, self-organising, and *autopoietic*, in that they create new 'universes' rather than reproducing the *I* (self).¹⁸ The term 'encounter' or 'art-encounter' refers to the possibility of a complex event which by its nature interrupts and disrupts and then may change us if we attend to it, if we act upon it. Baraitser cites Alain Badiou in her own work with *maternal encounters* to help in understanding of the subjectifying potential of 'encounters'.¹⁹ For Badiou, the idea of subjectivity is something that arises out of an 'event' (which can only be named as an 'event' after it occurs), and it is the way we retroactively act as if an event happened that gains us subjectivity.²⁰ An art-encounter such as the one I have described might be thought of as an 'event', although it might not be experienced as one at the time. By acting as if something has happened, that there was a passing on, a change, in Badiou's terms, subjectivity might emerge from an art-encounter.

A potentiality of art is its ability to function as a complex refrain that invokes an encounter, an encounter which in itself can function as relational and generative subjectifying event. In this context, the encounter with Louise Bourgeois can be interpreted as having operated as complex refrain which opened the possibility of new universes.

New Universes

After my art-encounter, I *did* act as if something had happened, and I *did* retroactively name the encounter as such. The reasons why this particular encounter was so affecting and effecting is a complex puzzle to piece together. However, a significant piece of the puzzle lies in the affective nature of the art, how it delved into me, how it connected to me and me to it, and how it forced a response. What was activated in me was a desire to change my trajectory which helped to coax my subjectivity out of the chaos where it had been languishing. Thereafter a series of occurrences came from deciding to act upon the feelings, to act upon this event, this atypical interruption which produced of a new kind of *rhythm*²¹ that became actualised in seeking out and doing things differently, changing my reality, taking me from my *current world* to a place of 'material and energetic flows':

To move forward then, into the social domain of material and energetic flows, is already to feel the transiting desire of incorporeal universes: fragments of music, poetry, images, which return rhythmically to your imagination in the form of refrains, blocs of disembodied artifice.²²

My moving forward embroiled me in a process of thinking and doing. I had to re-evaluate and re-configure all that I had known and understood (or not understood). I had been working in family therapy and the aftershock of this encounter would ultimately destabilise this world. I started to read, write, and draw. I read, among other things, about art and about maternity, philosophy, and fiction. This post-encounter activity with its different material and energetic flows led to a complete change in direction which helped me to conceive of a work of research that explores art, encounter, maternity, subjectivity, and the relation between maternity and art.²³ The research that originated in an art-encounter is ongoing and continues rhizomatically; sinuously weaving a text in which I hope to capture new thinking on art encounters, maternity, subjectivity, and their relation to art that is emergent, generative, and reflexive.

This text has explored art's affective potential, how it might function as a complex refrain, which can affect us in different and unique ways. In this relational encounter between an *I* and a non-*I*(s) there is a passing on of something that can act as a rupture to our everyday experience, and which if we chose to act on this feeling, this sense, can be potentially transformative:

The work of art, for those who use it, is an activity of unframing, of rupturing sense, a baroque proliferation or extreme impoverishment which leads to a recreation and

reinvention of the subject itself.²⁴

If we chose to ‘use it’ and we act with fidelity to this encounter, allowing ourselves to be both affected and effected, such art encounters may challenge how (a) life is lived, inviting – indeed provoking – change.

NOTES

1. Simon O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation*, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 1.
2. Lisa Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption*, London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis, 2009, p. 46.
3. Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, p. 46.
4. Rosemary Betterton, 'Louise Bourgeois, Ageing, and Maternal Bodies', *Feminist Review*, 93 (2009), pp. 27–45.
5. Bracha Ettinger; in her own complex matrixial thesis, tells us that the maternal is always there, inscribed on the I through an encounter-event. See Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.
6. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, tr. by Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson, London: Verso, 1994.
7. O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters: Deleuze and Guattari*, p. 103.
8. O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters: Deleuze and Guattari*, p. 103.
9. Stephen Zepke, *Art as Abstract Machine: Ontology and Aesthetics in Deleuze and Guattari*, London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis, 2005, p. 152.
10. Zepke, *Art as Abstract Machine*, p. 152.
11. Zepke, *Art as Abstract Machine*, p. 152.
12. Felix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, tr. by Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis, Sydney: Power Publications, 1995.
13. Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, pp. 16–17.
14. Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, p. 19.
15. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton, 'Translator's Introduction', in Felix Guattari (1989), *The Three Ecologies*, London: Athlone Press, 2005, pp. 1–21.
16. Marcel Proust (1913), *In Search of Lost Time, Vol 1: Swann's Way*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terrence Kilmartin, London, Vintage, 1996 (cited by translators of Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, in note 25, p. 88. Parentheses are the translator's).
17. Felix Guattari, 'Ritournelles et Affects Existentiels' in *Cartographies Schizoanalytiques*, Paris, Galilee, p. 254. Cited by Holmes, 2009, Brian Holmes, *Guattari's Schizoanalytic Cartographies*, 2009, note 40 <<http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/02/27/guattaris-schizoanalytic-cartographies/#sdfootnote40sym>> [accessed 4 December 2010]
18. Rosi Braidotti explains autopoeisis as the maintenance of a machinic system that mediates energy into organised and distributed matter. It thus brings organisation to disparate elements, but in doing so remains open. The machine can be seen as a site of becoming that is emancipated from purely technological connotations to encompass living organisms and more abstract matter. In these machinic terms autopoeisis is concerned with not so much making sense in a meaningful way, but rather with a becoming-subject, subjectivity as a creative process. Rosi Braidotti (2009), *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*, Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press, 2006.
19. Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption* and particularly the following works by Alain Badiou: *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, tr. by Peter Hallward, London: Verso, 2001 (1998); *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return of Philosophy* (eds. Justin Clemens and Oliver Feltham), London: Continuum, 2003; *Theoretical Writings* (eds. ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano), London: Continuum, 2004.
20. Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption*.
21. O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation*.
22. Brian Holmes, *Guattari's Schizoanalytic Cartographies*, <<http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2009/02/27/guattaris-schizoanalytic-cartographies/#sdfootnote40sym>> [accessed 4 December 2010]
23. Paula McCloskey, 'A Cartography of Maternity, Subjectivity and Art-Encounters', *Studies in the Maternal*, 1:3 (2010).
24. Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, p. 131.