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Abstract

Salvador Dali's *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (Figure 1) and *Swans Reflecting Elephants* (Figure 2) hung prominently on enlarged wooden boards above the piano in my family home.

I found solace in reflection while playing music, subconsciously exploring Dali's abstracted, looming artworks above me on the wall as life taught me about abuse.



Fig. 1



Fig 2.

Chiaroscuro and alien landscapes evoked a strangeness I did not understand; yet, in feeling the power of Surrealism, they seemed self-important and masculine. Portraying dreamworlds of abundance, over-indulgence, hyper-individualism and misogyny, my relationship with them was tinted by negative associations.

When I learned what came after Surrealism—liberating styles of art that shattered all previous conventions— I was comforted; they gave me far more than they asked for in return.

Viewers step into Surrealism, while Abstract Expressionism, as Ross (1990) notes, steps into the viewer. This movement encouraged personal interpretation and offered freedom from controlled objectivity and lived pressures. With abuse being both a destructive and formative force in my life, I have attempted to use nonrepresentational artistic expression as a means of channeling trauma into something constructive for my well-being, learning that these outlets are important for health and happiness.

“The capacity of art, music, and dance to circumvent the speechlessness that comes with terror may be one reason they are used as trauma treatments in cultures around the world.” (Van der Kolk, 2015)

I will use this essay to examine the intertwined themes of abuse, catharsis, and artistic expression, identifying persuasive connections to contextualise a question for further research.

Abuse

Within the UK government's Care and Support Statutory Guidance, (2025) they identify ten types of abuse that can affect individuals. These types include: physical, domestic, sexual, psychological or emotional, financial or material, modern slavery, discrimination, organizational or institutional abuse, neglect or acts of omission, and self-neglect.

Through personal experience, abuse influenced my career; I gravitated towards working with vulnerable people; in making them safe, I made myself safe.

After moving to Wales and starting a family, I came to the difficult realisation that despite my good intentions to help the vulnerable, those above me often ended up being or empowering abusive individuals within the workforce. Corruption within the system made my attempts to create positive change feel ineffective. Instead, I decided to return to art. I found myself exploring the representation of abuse—most recently, environmental abuse, as even the government has admitted (albeit quietly) that “a sixth mass extinction may be underway” (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 2026, p. 5).

In 1947, Adolf Gottlieb explained that:

Different times require different images. Today when our aspirations have been reduced to a desperate attempt to escape from evil, and times are out of joint, our obsessive, subterranean and pictographic images are the expression of the neurosis which is our reality. To my mind certain so-called abstraction is not abstraction at all. On the contrary, it is the realism of our time. (Ross, 1990, p. 52)

There are alarming social and economic parallels between today and the 1940s. The ‘realism of *our* time’ is an ever-expanding understanding of humanity's impact on the planet.

The nuclear threats that emboldened Gottlieb and other Abstract Expressionists have only intensified over time, with our own government stating that “our nuclear deterrent has never been more important”, especially amid climate-related resource instability (*The UK's nuclear deterrent: the National Endeavour explained*, no date; *Nature security assessment on global biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and national security*, 2026).

Laws like the Public Order Act 2023 are compromising our rights and societal freedoms. As we are under the influence of abusive world leaders who are driving humanity toward ecocide (Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs 2026), culture must reflect this.

Art challenges abusive norms, highlighting issues that might otherwise go unnoticed. One example of this, shown in Figure 3, is that during the pandemic, my personal experiences with the National Health Service encouraged me to respond creatively. Our government reacted badly to the virus (*The public health*



Fig. 4

ceramics overlay smashed words. Collectively illustrating the cycle of emotional release and reconstruction—gesturing the ongoing process of healing and personal growth—carefully positioned around the base of a pure white clay vessel, suggesting a desire to rebuild from the mess and rubble. Materials continue to shed from the coat to this day, symbolising the ongoing process of working through trauma.

Rather than being created in response to abuse, artist performances such as Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964 &

1965), Marina Abramović's *Rhythm O* (1974), Echo Morgan's *Cut Piece* (2019), and Shia LaBeouf's *#IAMSORRY* (2014) were perhaps abusive experiences for the artists.

Encouraging audience participation, Ono had her underwear cut while she sat, seemingly dissociating (*Yoko Ono. Cut Piece. 1964 | MoMA, no date; The Lonely Palette Podcast, 2023*). Abramović was cut with a knife, had her blood consumed, was positioned with a loaded gun, and carried like an object (*Marina Abramović. Rhythm 0. 1974 | MoMA, no date*). Morgan had her bra aggressively taken from her and swung in the air for the audience to cheer; she also had her knickers taken from her by a crying woman ('Echo Morgan', 2019). LaBeouf silently met with members of the public, one of whom he reported had whipped him, stripped him, and then raped him (Dazed, 2014).

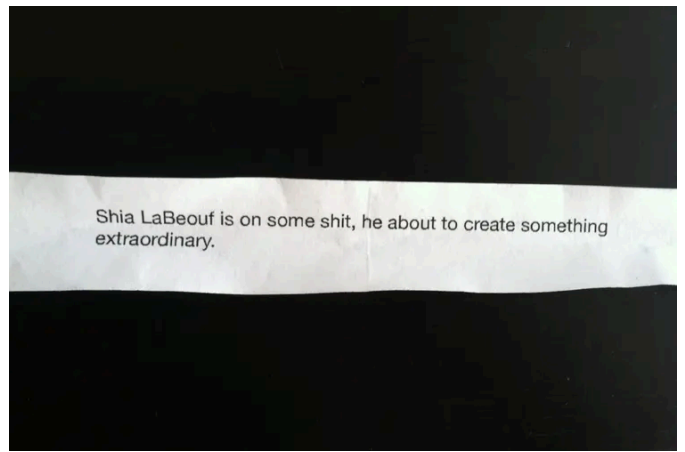


Fig 5

In these circumstances, each artist created the setting where such acts could be inflicted upon them, whether by sitting near scissors or beside a table filled with objects such as a gun, bullet, scalpel, and whip (among others).

In contrast, LaBeouf allowed strangers to choose a prop—such as a whip, or a bowl of insulting messages on paper (among other items)—before entering a *private* space with him (Sandoval, 2014).

As consensual art pieces, I believe they explored the possibilities of abuse—albeit in a performative manner.

In 2012, artist Emma Sulkowicz reported a rape by another student. Her university's refusal to expel him prompted her to create a film reenacting the experience, entitled *Ceci n'est pas un viol* ('This is not a rape'), an homage to René Magritte's work *Ceci N'est Pas Une Pipe*. Amid a legal investigation and ensuing focus on the validity of her claims, she also carried a mattress around campus as a performance piece, as part of her Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight) project (Alter, 2015; Saul, 2015).

Catharsis

Originating in ancient Greece, the earliest recorded uses of the word "catharsis" include Aristotle's observation that watching a poetic tragedy can evoke pity or fear, embracing emotions in a safe space, leading to a cathartic release (Shahzad, 2018), and ancient physicians also used the term to describe medical interventions that removed harmful substances from the body, not to mention religious uses of the word.

In psychotherapy in 1909, Sigmund Freud stated that 'the reaction of the person injured to the trauma has really no perfect "cathartic" effect unless it is an adequate reaction like revenge' (Freud, 2015, p.5).

From an ethical perspective, John Gassner described catharsis as "complete aesthetic gratification" (Shahzad, 2018).

In this context, catharsis is an intensely personal process for the artist.

The creative process [...] consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. [...] the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life. (Jung, Adler and Hull, 1978.)

According to Brown (1997, p. 26), a powerful stimulus provokes an equally powerful response, leading to a form of emotional release or resolution, which seemed to be the case for artist Louise Bourgeois, described as the inventor of Confessional Art (Dorment, 2010). She published writings and collections of anecdotes alongside massive sculptures that have been repeatedly analysed (Silver, 2022).

Bourgeois consistently described her childhood abuse as central to her sculptural work, creating a space where she could confront her triggers and maintain her mental health. Miller (2018, p. 101-119) notes that "it is unusual for an artist to be so open about such earlier [...] traumas and to acknowledge them as the driving force of her art." Nonetheless, Bourgeois's creations sought emotional truth. Battling depression was an art she practiced throughout her life, exploring the pain of near-impossible communication inherent in the human experience (ibid., p.103).

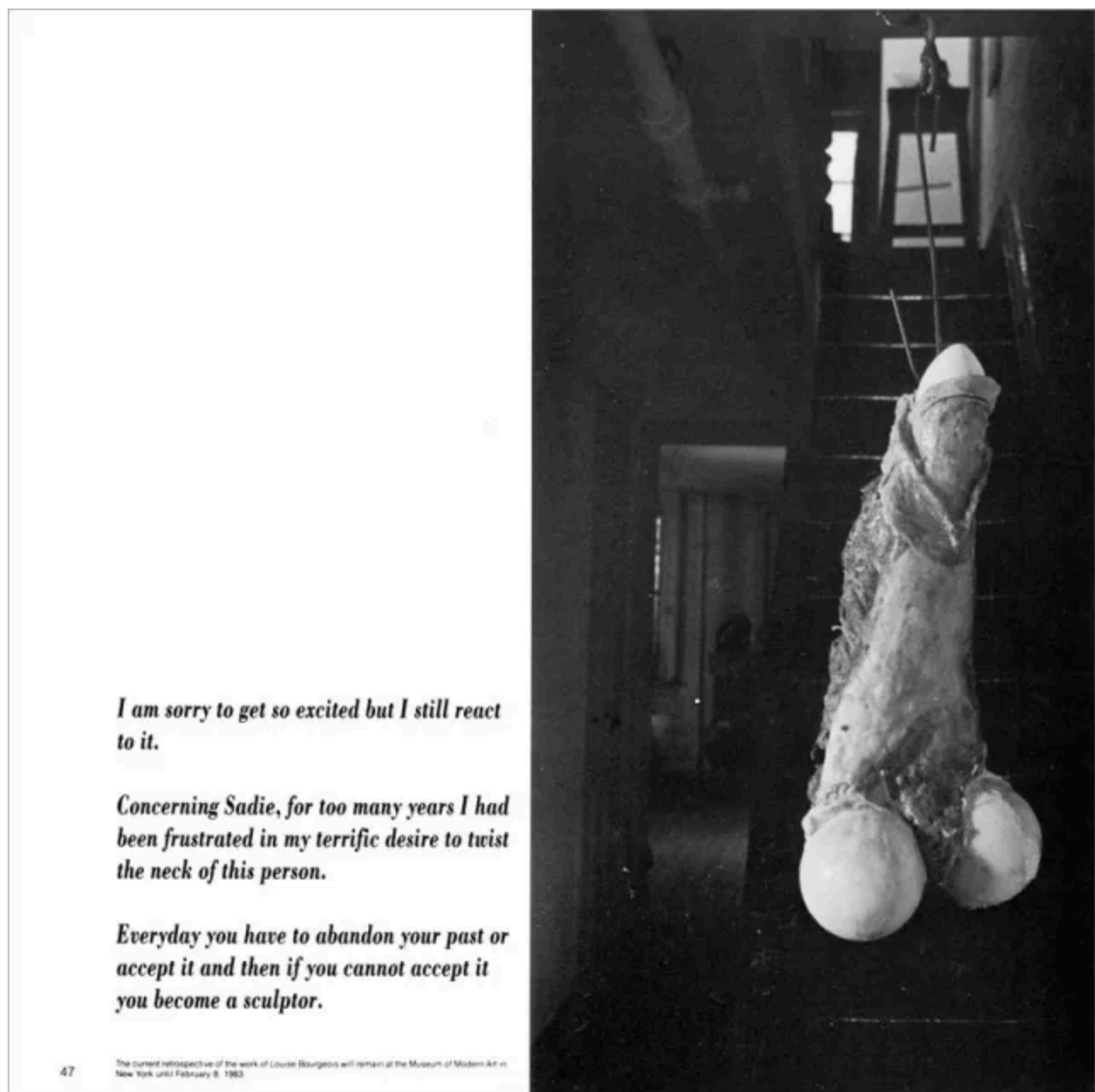


Fig. 6

The last sentence in Figure 6 resonates, as the struggle for acceptance of one's past often serves as a creative motivation. Louise Bourgeois exhibited exceptional openness: "Harnessing the power of the creative act, she communicates feelings of vulnerability, pain, and anger that can be felt profoundly, both bodily and viscerally, by her audience" (Miller, 2018).

Francisco Goya also confronted difficult themes, particularly in his later works, where evidence of catharsis is evident. His creation of eighty-three aquatint etchings depicting the atrocities of Napoleon's invasion of Spain, titled *Los Desastres de la Guerra* (The Disasters of War, 1810-1820), showcases his honesty. These scenes focus on the unchecked "vileness of soldiers run amok" that he witnessed in Madrid and Zaragoza, inviting viewers to see the calamities and suffering of the Peninsular War, devoid of the traditional

heroism and triumphalism often associated with such representation. Goya condemned both the French for their occupation and the Spanish for their excessive violence (Sontag, 2003, pp. 44-45; *The Disasters of War*, 1903).



Fig. 7

Figure 7 presents an image from the series (published thirty-five years after his death) depicting a citizen appearing to fall onto a pile of dead, fatally wounded individuals. Each print includes a challenging caption such as "That's why you were born" (*Para eso habeis nacido*), which sardonically suggests that life should not amount to such tragedy. Other captions, like "This is too much!" and "There is no remedy," reinforce the series' sense of despair. By recording these events, Goya encourages understanding on an existential level.

"With Goya, a new standard for responsiveness to suffering enters art. (And new subjects for fellow-feeling: as in, for example, his painting of an injured laborer being carried away from a building site.)" (Sontag, 2003, p. 44)

After suffering a severe illness that left him deaf, Goya's work became more introspective and dark. Painting seemed to serve as a release for his disillusionment, terror, and anxiety. His "Black Paintings"—created directly onto the walls of his home—were clearly not intended for public display, suggesting that the act of creating them was a private, therapeutic process. These works confront truth and suffering, providing an honest reflection of human cruelty (Francisco Goya Paintings, Bio, Ideas, no date).

By rejecting idealization—while insisting on emotional and psychological truth—Goya created catharsis from the horrors of war and governmental oppression.

Allowing for the expression of negative emotions can be especially relieving, much like personal writing is for people living with PTSD. Creative endeavors enable difficult emotions, such as fear, rage, and grief, to be externalized, reframed, and processed (Van der Kolk, 2015, pp. 238-241).

Artistic expression

Jake and Dinos Chapman collaborated for 31 years before pursuing solo careers in 2022. Their work often "improves" original artworks, appropriating pieces from art history and testing the limits of representation and spectatorship through dark humor and irony (The Chapmans Paintings, Bio, Ideas, no date). They staged encounters with abuse, almost forcing the viewer into a compromised ethical position where the act of looking becomes the focus. Expression in their practice operates less as personal confession or catharsis—more as cultural diagnosis—often using detailed miniature dioramas to emphasize controversial, antagonistic, and ironic perspectives on the extremes of society.

The use of bronze in their series of unexploded bomb vests, **Monuments to Immortality** (2021), plays on the material's typical use in memorializing heroes. One vest contains art materials instead of explosives: "As one would expect from the brothers, a dialogue with death ensues, in which the risk and danger of being an artist is pitched against the power of the artist's conviction to fight for belief" (GIANT, 2021).

Their first collaboration dealt with the iconoclastic appropriation of Goya's **The Disasters of War** (shown in Figure 8), presenting an almost childlike interpretation of his etchings. By depicting each of Goya's prints in model railway proportions, their shocking, meticulous detail allows for a reexamination of whether the representation of humanity's horrors can ever meaningfully change society, especially when modern audiences consume violence aesthetically and commercially.

With sardonic humor, they underline how far contemporary art pushes moral boundaries, especially as it "maintains technical excellence" (Sandu, 2025).



Fig. 8

Combining art history and modern themes blurs the distinction between innocence and corruption, victim and perpetrator, and raises questions not only about why violence exists but also about why audiences continue to look at it.

In response to the violence of World War II, Abstract Expressionism emerged during the 1940s and 1950s as a revolutionary approach to art that placed individual emotion, spontaneity, and psychological depth at its center. Artists challenged traditional values and sought new meaning, expressing inner experiences through gesture, color, scale, and texture. This redefined the role of the artist, transforming painting into a direct record of personal expression (Ross, 1990).

These artworks confronted audiences in a new and challenging way—much like contemporary works challenge us today—because subconscious exploration has fundamentally changed the role of artistic expression in modern and contemporary art

which force[s] the viewer to recall and experience a range of powerful emotions and feelings, in effect giving the public an opportunity to experience the same confrontation with the subconscious that attended the artists during creation (*ibid.*, p.18).



Fig. 9

These artists emphasized that the process of creating art is just as important as the finished work. Willem de Kooning treated painting as a direct expression of feeling, instinct, and human energy (*ibid.*, pp. 35-50).

Unlike traditional artists who carefully planned compositions or aimed to represent subjects realistically, de Kooning approached painting as an active and emotional process. His work emphasized movement, spontaneity, and the visible struggle between control and chaos, making the act of creation itself central to artistic expression.

Figure 9 shows how Mark Rothko explored emotion through large fields of glowing color that evoke contemplation, tragedy, and spirituality. He regarded his pictures as dramas, in which the shapes act as performers (ibid., p. 167). Rothko believed that art should communicate universal human feelings without relying on recognizable imagery. In this way, the art movement demonstrated that expression could emerge through mood and atmosphere as much as through dramatic action. Bold, abstracted imagery reflected the uncertainty of the time along with a desire for freedom.

By rejecting strict rules and realistic representation, these artists asserted the importance of individuality in a rapidly changing world. Their works often appear raw, unfinished, or chaotic, “working with forms that are unknown even to [the artist]” (ibid., p. 125), yet these qualities reveal authenticity and emotional honesty. Artistic expression that places the inner self at the center of art began with Abstract Expressionism. These were deeply personal acts of communication that have influenced generations of artists who followed.

Conclusion and research question

Art has become inseparable from my understanding of trauma, reflection, and recovery. An unspoken presence in childhood imagery has evolved into a critical lens through which I interpret both personal experiences and broader systems of harm. Artistic expression occupies a space where pain can be externalized and transformed. This aligns with the idea of catharsis as both psychological release and aesthetic resolution, where creating art becomes a way of reorganizing experiences that resist verbal articulation. Functioning as both a witness to and a response to abuse at personal, social, and environmental levels, art offers a framework through which suffering can be acknowledged without being contained by it. This allows for reflection, critique, and, at times, reconstruction.

How do modern visual art practices help people who have experienced abuse deal with their trauma, and how does this process lead to psychological change through non-literal forms of artistic expression?

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