

2114455

Student Name: Megan Jenkins

Programme of Study: Fine Art: Studio, Site and Context (BA)

Module: Independent Project (ADAA6000)

Essay Title: From Wound to Work: Art as Expression of Memory and Trauma

Student Number: 2114455

Word Count: 6,411

Table of Contents:

List of Illustrations.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Autoethnography and the Artist's Position.....	5
Chapter One: Hauntology and the Persistence of Memory.....	7
Case Study 1: Nan Goldin.....	8
Chapter Two: Material Hauntings.....	13
Case Study 2: Kiki Smith.....	13
Chapter Three: The Intimate Space.....	17
Case Study 3: Louise Bourgeois.....	18
Chapter Four: Vessels of Absence.....	21
Case Study 4: Jordan Wolfson.....	21
Art as Exorcism.....	25
Reflexive Note.....	26
Conclusion.....	27

List of Illustrations

Figure 1. Goldin, N. (1983) *Nan and Brian in Bed, New York City*. Silver dye bleach print. Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/nan-goldin-nan-and-brian-in-bed-new-york-city-1> (Accessed: 28 March 2025)

Figure 2. Goldin, N. (1983) *Nan One Month After Being Battered*. Silver dye bleach print. Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/nan-goldin-nan-one-month-after-being-battered> (Accessed: 30 March 2025)

Figure 3. Smith, K. (1992) *Tale*. Wax, pigment, and papier-mache. Available at: <https://rlwall.wordpress.com/research/theory/contextual-study/kiki-smith-tale/> (Accessed:

Figure 4. Bourgeois, L. (1990–1993) *Cell (Glass Spheres and Hands)*. Glass, iron, wood, linoleum, canvas, marble. Available at: <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/57353/> (Accessed: 2 December 2024)

Figure 5. Wolfson, J. (2016) *Coloured Sculpture*. Mixed media installation. Available at: <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/punch-and-injury> (Accessed: 10 April 2025)

Introduction

Art has long served as a medium through which individuals process personal and collective trauma. This dissertation explores the role of art as a conduit for expression, healing, and post-traumatic growth through an autoethnographic lens. It seeks to answer the following question:

What is the cultural and psychological landscape for artists who use art as a means of expressing trauma, and how does this process foster healing?

To approach this question, the dissertation employs a multi-theoretical framework that draws from psychoanalytic theory, phenomenology, and affect studies. Psychoanalytic concepts - particularly those related to the uncanny, repetition, and abjection - offer insight into the symbolic expression of trauma and its lingering effects on the self (Freud, 1919; Caruth, 1996; Kristeva, 1982).

Phenomenology, as shaped by thinkers such as Gaston Bachelard, informs the exploration of lived spatial and bodily experience, illuminating how memory and emotion are embedded in material forms and architectural environments (Bachelard, 1994). In parallel, affect theory and trauma studies help to articulate how trauma circulates - both somatically and socially - through image, gesture, and material trace, enabling an engagement with what Jill Bennett (2005) calls “affective transmission.” Together, these intersecting frameworks provide a means to critically examine how trauma is not only remembered but performed, felt, and materialised through contemporary art practices. Informed by concepts such as hauntology (the persistence of past memories in present experience) and the uncanny (the unsettling intersection of the familiar and strange), this dissertation will argue that the artist's engagement with trauma is not only deeply personal but profoundly cultural, illuminating universal aspects of human vulnerability and resilience. Employing an autoethnographic methodology allows for an intimate blending of personal narrative with wider cultural critique. To ground this inquiry, the practices of four key artists; Nan Goldin, Louise Bourgeois, and Jordan Wolfson are examined. Each artist embodies a unique response to trauma through their chosen mediums, offering pathways into understanding how memory, embodiment, and emotional resonance function within art-making as a survival strategy.

Autoethnography and the Artist's Position

Autoethnography arises from the intersection of ethnography and autobiography, blending self-reflection with broader cultural critique. Rooted in postmodern and critical traditions, it challenges the notion of detached research, positing that personal experience can be a legitimate site of knowledge production (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). In the context of trauma, this approach is particularly powerful, allowing the researcher to embody the very tensions under study. Choosing autoethnography for this thesis is intentional: trauma is deeply subjective, and the journey of creating art as a means of survival is profoundly personal. To speak *about* trauma without acknowledging its subjective, bodily nature would risk abstraction or erasure.

Several studies strongly affirm the validity of auto-ethnography as a rigorous and impactful research methodology, particularly for exploring deeply personal and emotive subjects such as trauma, grief, and transformation. Carolyn Ellis's *Final Negotiations: A Story of Love, Loss, and Chronic Illness* (1995) stands as a seminal example, wherein Ellis documents her experience of losing her partner to illness through a deeply reflexive, narrative approach. Rather than maintaining the objective distance traditionally expected in qualitative research, Ellis advocates for emotional engagement and vulnerability, arguing that "the self is a legitimate source of scholarly knowledge" (Ellis, 1995, p. 11). Her intertwining of storytelling and analysis demonstrates how the articulation of personal experience can contribute meaningfully to academic discourse, challenging conventions of detached scholarship. Similarly, Arthur Bochner's *Coming to Narrative: A Personal History of Paradigm Change in the Human Sciences* (2014) charts his intellectual journey from traditional social science toward narrative inquiry and autoethnography. Bochner positions storytelling as a central mechanism for processing trauma and fostering personal transformation, asserting that "stories are the method by which humans come to terms with the contingencies of existence" (Bochner, 2014, p. 18). Their approaches suggest that by foregrounding subjective, embodied knowledge, researchers can illuminate the complex interrelations between personal suffering, cultural meaning-making, and modes of healing. This provides an essential framework

for investigating how artists, through their creative practices, transform trauma into aesthetic and existential exploration, bridging the private and the public, the individual and the collective.

Chapter One: Hauntology and the Persistence of Memory

In tracing the role of personal narrative within both academic research and artistic practice, it becomes clear that trauma is not only inscribed within the self but also lingers across time, resurfacing in unpredictable and often haunting ways. Autoethnography's emphasis on subjective, embodied experience highlights how trauma distorts memory, disrupts linear temporality, and resists neat resolution—an understanding that finds a potent conceptual parallel in Jacques Derrida's notion of hauntology. Just as autoethnography foregrounds the ongoing, unresolved nature of personal suffering, hauntology illuminates how memory, trauma, and creativity are intricately entangled, blurring the boundaries between past and present, self and other, absence and presence (Derrida, 1993; Fisher, 2014). Derrida's notion of hauntology, first articulated in *Specters of Marx* (1993), describes a condition in which the past refuses to remain inert or fully knowable, instead persisting as a spectral presence that unsettles the temporal and ontological certainties of the present. Hauntology suggests that history is not neatly sequential but layered, fragmented, and recursive—a conceptualisation particularly resonant when considering the enduring effects of trauma (Derrida, 1993). In the context of art-making, hauntology manifests through recurring motifs, the decay and distortion of imagery, and emotional echoes that shape the artist's identity and practice. Art becomes not merely a reflection of experience but a haunted site where memory lingers, reconfigures, and demands re-engagement (Fisher, 2014; Blanco & Peeren, 2013).

Building on the framework of embodied narrative developed here, this chapter explores how the logic of haunting - the spectral persistence of memory and trauma - further illuminates the entanglement between personal experience and artistic production. This phenomenological experience of memory as visceral, fragmented, and recursive is not unique to my own practice. It resonates across the works of other artists who similarly confront the echoes of trauma through form and material. Among them, Nan Goldin stands out for how her photographic practice embodies this hauntological condition, offering a visual grammar of temporal rupture and emotional recurrence.

Case Study 1: Nan Goldin

This phenomenological experience of memory as visceral, fragmented, and recursive resonates across the works of artists who confront the echoes of trauma through form and material. Among them, Nan Goldin stands out for how her photographic practice embodies this hauntological condition, offering a visual grammar of temporal rupture and emotional recurrence.

Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986) comprises hundreds of snapshot-style photographs presented as a visual diary. Capturing scenes of love, addiction, intimacy, and loss across cities like New York and Berlin, the work blends personal narrative with a curated soundtrack. Originally performed as a live slideshow, *The Ballad* reflects the artist's need to document and preserve memory as a means of emotional control and remembrance (MoMA, 2016). The images, frequently blurred, grainy, or bathed in melancholic light, resist the closure that traditional photography often implies. Rather than freezing time into static, commemorative frames, Goldin's photographs feel unstable, restless, and insistently alive—haunted by loss, vulnerability, and the inevitability of change (Grundberg, 1986).



Figure 1. Nan and Brian in Bed, New York City, 1983

Silver dye bleach print

15 1/2 × 23 3/16 in | 39.4 × 58.9 cm

Nan Goldin's *Nan and Brian in Bed* (1983) is a pivotal work from the series. The photograph captures a quiet but emotionally charged moment: Goldin lies in bed beside her then-partner Brian, who sits turned away from her, staring into the distance. The composition and subdued lighting evoke a palpable sense of detachment and tension, foregrounding the complexities of intimacy, desire, and alienation. Power dynamics are embedded within this particular image, Brian's dominant posture contrast starkly with Goldin's reclined, vulnerable position, suggesting imbalance within their relationship. This reading is heightened by the knowledge that their relationship was abusive - something Goldin confronts directly in her subsequent image, *Nan One Month After Being Battered* (1984), which documents her bruised face following an assault by Brian. The image presents the artist staring directly at the camera, her face marked with the visible bruises and swelling inflicted by her then-partner, Brian. In contrast to conventional representations of victimhood, Goldin confronts the viewer head-on, unflinching and self-possessed. The image is not staged for pity—it is a stark act of testimony and agency. Rather than conceal or sanitise the violence, Goldin exposes it, making the private visible and the personal political. This aligns with feminist strategies of the 1980s that used autobiographical work to challenge patriarchal silence around domestic abuse (Solomon-Godeau, 1991). The aesthetic tension within the image adds to its emotional impact. Despite the brutality suggested by her injuries, Goldin wears makeup—red lipstick, a touch of eye shadow, and pearl earrings. These details complicate any simplistic reading of vulnerability or victimhood. The contradiction between her adornment and the bruises suggests an attempt at reclaiming identity, or perhaps a haunting of normative femininity by the violence it is often asked to mask. As *The Guardian* notes, “It is the cosmetic alongside the wound—the performative self within the damaged body—that makes this image so enduringly unsettling” (Adams, 2022).



Figure 2. *Nan One Month After Being Battered*, 1984

Silver dye bleach print

15 1/2 × 23 1/8 in | 39.4 × 58.7 cm

These works, when considered together, expose the complex interplay between intimacy and violence, love and power, memory and trauma (Meyers, 2006; Grundberg, 1986). *Nan and Brian in Bed* exemplifies Goldin's raw, snapshot-like style, often marked by blur, grain, and natural lighting. This visual language deliberately resists polished, staged photography, opting instead for what she calls "the density and flavour of life" (Martin Parr Foundation, n.d.). Her photographs do not offer closure or resolution but instead dwell in the ambiguity and intensity of lived experience. As Liz Kotz argues, Goldin's work offers "a counter-narrative to the dominant photographic tradition," replacing detached observation with emotional immediacy and self-exposure (Kotz, 1992). This confessional quality not only situates the work within traditions of autobiographical practice but also aligns it with broader discourses on trauma and the persistence of memory—particularly how sensory details can reactivate emotional experience, a theme central to Goldin's work and to hauntological theory more generally. Moreover, Goldin subverts the traditional power dynamics of the photographic gaze by simultaneously occupying the roles of both subject and photographer. This challenges the historically male-dominated perspective of photography and reclaims

authorship over her own body, relationships, and memories. According to cultural theorist Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Goldin's work "operates as both testimony and self-representation," collapsing the boundary between documentation and artistic construction (Solomon-Godeau, 1991). *Nan and Brian in Bed* (1983) exemplifies Goldin's deeply personal, emotionally saturated approach to photography. The image is not just a portrait of a couple—it is a visual articulation of longing, emotional fracture, and the spectral presence of trauma within intimacy. Through this work, Goldin collapses the boundary between art and life, public and private, rendering visible the often hidden emotional realities of human relationships.

"*The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* is the diary I let people read," Goldin wrote. "The diary is my form of control over my life. It allows me to obsessively record every detail. It enables me to remember." - Nan Goldin

In this way, Goldin's visual language mirrors Derrida's hauntology, in which the past refuses to recede neatly into history, instead manifesting in ghostly repetitions and emotional residue (Derrida, 1993). This recursive impulse—to revisit, reframe, and re-feel—places Goldin within a lineage of artists who do not aim to resolve trauma, but to make space for its presence, to coexist with its haunting. In doing so, they affirm the idea that art is not simply a site of catharsis, but a space where memory and trauma are continually negotiated - where the past lives on, not as something to be forgotten, but as something to be felt, again and again. Even decades later, Goldin's vivid colour photography and raw, unfiltered style continue to confront viewers with their emotional intensity. She describes memory as something deeply sensory—rooted in colour, smell, sound, and the physical texture of life. *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* not only chronicles her personal journey but also reveals broader insights into the emotional and communicative gaps between men and women (Martin Parr Foundation, n.d.). While Goldin's work primarily explores the affective and temporal dimensions of trauma, it also opens the door to considering how trauma is experienced through and on the body—both literally and metaphorically. Her bruised face, her adorned but damaged skin, and the tactile textures of her photographs gesture toward a deeper

entanglement between memory and materiality. The wounds are not only emotional; they are embedded in flesh, image, and surface. This bodily inscription of memory creates a compelling bridge into the next chapter, which shifts from the photographic frame to the physical realm of matter and form.

Chapter Two: Material Hauntings

Following the exploration of hauntology and the persistence of memory in art, this chapter turns to the material dimension of trauma, considering how the body itself—and by extension the materials that evoke it—becomes a site of haunting. While the previous chapter examined how trauma distorts temporality and narrative, here the focus shifts toward how trauma is physically inscribed and materially externalised.

Trauma is not solely a psychological phenomenon; it imprints itself on the body in tangible ways. As Bessel van der Kolk (2015) asserts, "the body keeps the score," storing traumatic memory in the form of physiological and somatic responses that resist articulation. Similarly, Sara Ahmed (2004) highlights how emotions leave marks on bodies, shaping their very orientations in the world. Within this framework, the body is not a sealed entity but a porous, permeable site through which memory, emotion, and history continually circulate. It follows, then, that in artistic practice, materials that mimic the body's vulnerability—such as latex, wax, and fabric—can powerfully evoke the residual presence of trauma.

Avery Gordon's (2008) concept of "ghostly matters" further illuminates this intersection between materiality and haunting. Gordon argues that ghosts emerge not only in narrative or memory but also in the very texture of the social and material world, disrupting the boundary between presence and absence. In artistic terms, this disruption often manifests through materials that suggest fragility, decay, and permeability—qualities that make the invisible traces of trauma visible.

Case Study 2: Kiki Smith

Following the exploration of the body as a haunted site - one through which trauma circulates and memory imprints - Kiki Smith's sculptural practice offers a compelling investigation into the body not as a stable form, but as a permeable, fractured archive of experience. Her work grapples with corporeal vulnerability, drawing attention to the body's susceptibility to rupture, decay, and

transformation. Through the use of organic, skin-like materials such as wax, paper, and latex, Smith evokes the body as a porous boundary between interior and exterior, presence and absence. Smith's exploration of bodily trauma is shaped in part by personal and familial loss. The early death of her sister Beatrice and the illness of her father, Minimalist sculptor Tony Smith, cast a long shadow over her life and work. These experiences contributed to her enduring interest in mortality, bodily fluids, and the porous boundaries between life and death (Blessing, 1996). Her sculptures become both monuments and mourning objects—material attempts to register the ephemeral and the felt. Much of Smith's work in the late 1980s and 1990s centres on the female body, dissected and fragmented into parts—organs, limbs, skin—laid bare with a visceral honesty that resists idealisation.

Tale (1992)

Kiki Smith's *Tale* (1992) is one of her most striking and unsettling works—a life-sized female figure crafted from papier-mâché and beeswax, positioned on all fours with a long, brown trail extending from her behind across the gallery floor. The form is animalistic, defeated, and exposed, pushing the boundaries of both bodily representation and viewer comfort. In this work, Smith powerfully engages with the themes of abjection, bodily shame, trauma, and the porousness of the skin, situating the body as a site of rupture and raw visibility. Constructed from fragile, flesh-toned materials such as wax and papier-mâché, the sculpture feels both visceral and delicate. These skin-like materials heighten the sense of corporeal vulnerability and temporality - they decay, stain, and are difficult to preserve. Smith's use of such materials mirrors her thematic concern with the body as something impermanent and susceptible to rupture - something that remembers through materiality. The trail of excrement literalises what is usually hidden or repressed, forcing the viewer into an encounter with the most base, bodily expulsion - what Julia Kristeva calls *abjection*: that which must be expelled to maintain the illusion of a coherent self (Kristeva, 1982). In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva writes that the abject is not simply filth but “what disturbs identity, system, order... what does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva, 1982, p.4). *Tale* exemplifies this: the figure not only breaks bodily boundaries but also disrupts institutional ones, bringing the private

into the public, the object into the gallery. The long fecal trail is both literally degrading and symbolically rich—tracing trauma, pain, and the loss of bodily control.



Figure 3. *Tale*, 1992

Wax, pigment, and papier-mache

160x23x23

The posture of the figure—on hands and knees, head down—evokes a loss of agency, exhaustion, and shame. However, Smith’s own interpretation complicates a purely pitiful reading. She has said, “I was thinking about how people carry their history on their backs. The tail is part of that history” (Smith, quoted in Hoffmann, 2009). In this context, the trail of excrement becomes not just waste but an embodied archive of memory—a material trace of trauma that cannot be easily discarded. The figure does not choose to carry it, but neither can she let it go. This idea resonates with Avery Gordon’s concept of “ghostly matters,” where trauma leaves material and spectral traces that persist in everyday life (Gordon, 2008). The figure in *Tale* is not only leaking physically but haunted by what leaks—by the personal and collective wounds that manifest somatically. Through Kiki Smith’s materially and emotionally charged representations of the body, we are reminded that trauma is not only internalised within flesh but also externalised—materialised

through substances, surfaces, and spatial traces. Trauma, particularly in its persistent and ghostly manifestations, does not reside in the body alone. It reverberates outward, embedding itself in the spaces we inhabit.

Chapter Three: The Intimate Space

Building on the previous discussions of embodiment and material hauntings, Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958/1994) offers a phenomenological framework for understanding the house as an intimate, psychological extension of the self - a repository for dreams, memories, and often, for traumas that resist simple articulation. Bachelard proposes that the house is not merely a physical shelter but a container of lived experience, shaping and being shaped by the emotional life of its inhabitants. He writes, "the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (Bachelard, 1994, p. 6). In Bachelard's vision, the house becomes an extension of memory and imagination, a structure within which personal and collective histories unfold. This notion resonates deeply with trauma theory: if the body "keeps the score" of traumatic experience (Van der Kolk, 2015), then the house, too, preserves psychic imprints - often silently and invisibly - within its walls, rooms, and thresholds.

Particularly significant in Bachelard's analysis is his attention to specific parts of the home: the cellar, the attic, the corner. These spaces, marginal and often overlooked, become potent sites of psychic resonance. The cellar, for instance, is associated with the unconscious, with fears and buried memories: "In the cellar, darkness prevails both day and night" (Bachelard, 1994, p. 18). Similarly, corners evoke withdrawal, introspection, and emotional retreat. In Bachelard's terms, "Every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide... contributes to the strength of our inner life" (Bachelard, 1994, p. 137). These hidden spaces suggest that the domestic environment, like the mind, has its own architecture of repression and revelation, making it a fitting metaphor for the fragmented, layered experience of trauma.

Moreover, Bachelard's emphasis on the dynamic, imaginative engagement with space further aligns with the distortions of perception that trauma often produces. He asserts that spaces are not passive containers but are actively shaped by the emotions, memories, and imaginations of those who inhabit them (Bachelard, 1994, p. xxxv). In traumatic memory, as Cathy Caruth (1996) argues, the past is not simply remembered but re-experienced, often with a collapse of time and space.

Domestic spaces thus become elastic, expanding or contracting under the weight of emotional memory, and taking on uncanny dimensions. As Avery Gordon (2008) notes in her study of haunting, "haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence" (p. 8). Through this lens, the home—seemingly stable and familiar—becomes a site of spectral returns, saturated with the unresolved tensions of personal history.

Case Study 3: Louise Bourgeois

Louise Bourgeois' *Cell* series (begun in the early 1990s) offers a profound meditation on memory, trauma, and the psychic dimensions of space. These sculptural installations—part architecture, part theatre, part psychological tableau—construct intimate enclosures that resonate with emotional intensity. Viewed through the lens of Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958/1994), the *Cells* can be understood as phenomenological environments in which inner states are made visible through spatial form. They are not simply containers of objects; they are emotional architectures, charged with the residue of lived experience and constructed to stage the ongoing presence of memory.

Louise Bourgeois' artistic practice is deeply rooted in personal history, shaped by a lifelong engagement with memory, trauma, and emotional conflict. Born in Paris in 1911, Bourgeois was profoundly affected by her early family life—particularly her father's long-term affair with her English governess and her mother's chronic illness. These formative experiences, which she later described as sources of both pain and creative fuel, became foundational to her practice. In interviews and writings, Bourgeois often emphasised the therapeutic function of her art, describing it as a means of self-exploration and survival: "Art is a guarantee of sanity" (Bourgeois, quoted in Morris, 2008, p. 83). Themes of betrayal, abandonment, and vulnerability recur throughout her work, often framed through the language of the domestic and the bodily.

Cell (Glass Spheres and Hands) (1990–1993)

Cell (Glass Spheres and Hands) is comprised of a square enclosure built from aged metal window frames, the installation features five worn wooden chairs, each holding a fragile, translucent glass sphere. At the centre, a wooden table supports a pair of clasped marble hands—cast from the artist's own body. The entire structure evokes the architecture of a domestic interior, yet it feels dislocated, suspended in time, and loaded with unresolved emotional tension.



Figure 4. *Cell (Glass spheres and hands)*, 1990-1993

Glass, iron, wood, linoleum, canvas, marble

219.5 × 218.8 × 220.0 cm

This work is understood to represent the fractured dynamics of Bourgeois' own family. According to the National Gallery of Victoria, the glass spheres symbolise family members—including her father and his mistress—each one physically present yet emotionally isolated. “Each person exists as a glass sphere,” the Gallery notes, “isolated from the rest of the group and eternally closed off from interpersonal communication. The hands represent Bourgeois herself, an intense concentration of emotion, here of helplessness” (NGV, 2006). They are soft in gesture yet frozen in time—unable to

act, touch, or escape. This physical stillness echoes what Cathy Caruth (1996) describes as trauma's repetition compulsion: "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (p. 4). The hands become a mute plea, a gesture caught in a feedback loop of emotional arrest.

The installation makes use of several recurring tropes in Bourgeois' work: enclosure, repetition, bodily fragments, and transparency. As art historian Mignon Nixon has argued, Bourgeois' cells are "architectures of psychic containment," which expose "not the body as such, but its affective residues and traces" (Nixon, 2005, p. 50). Furthermore, the cell's grid-like structure reinforces the sensation of surveillance and containment. Like a room without a roof, the viewer can peer in but not enter, echoing Bourgeois' interest in memory as both intimate and inaccessible. The work's transparency is deceptive—it offers visual access, but no real intimacy. As Elisabeth Bronfen observes, "Bourgeois does not stage the body, but the residue of the self. Her cells become architectures of memory where affect haunts form" (Bronfen, 2004, p. 82). Trauma here is not dramatic or overt; it is ambient, embedded in the arrangements and distances between objects. The result is a deeply personal tableau that also articulates a broader understanding of how rooms—particularly those associated with childhood and family—can house emotional residue long after the events have passed.

In this way, Bourgeois' installations can also be seen as architectural vessels—spaces built to hold, contain, and conceal emotional intensity. The Cell becomes a kind of psychic chamber, a sculptural manifestation of what has been repressed, compartmentalised, or returned to obsessively.

Bourgeois herself described the *Cells* as "different types of pain: the physical, the emotional, the psychological, the mental and the intellectual" (Bourgeois, quoted in Bernadac, 1995, p. 85). Their physical boundaries create an external shell for what is internally uncontainable. The sculptural space thus mimics the body itself as a site of storage—of trauma, memory, and affect.

Chapter Four: Vessels of Absence

This opens up a compelling transition to the idea of vessels of absence. It invites comparison to other vessels, such as puppets or dolls, which similarly act as hollow proxies through which memory and narrative can be channelled. In both cases, the structure exists to be occupied—but when no one is “home,” the result is an eerie, uncanny space, one that unsettles even as it beckons. Like the house, these figures are designed to be inhabited—physically, emotionally, or metaphorically. Yet when they are left empty or become animated by an external force, they slip into the realm of the uncanny. The puppet, in particular, functions as a potent metaphor for the traumatised or dissociated body: manipulated from without, hollowed of subjectivity, and stripped of autonomy. As Susan Stewart (1993) notes in her exploration of dolls and miniature worlds, such objects oscillate between control and powerlessness, between the familiar and the estranged.

In his foundational text *The Uncanny*, Sigmund Freud (1919) identifies the uncanny as emerging from that which is “strangely familiar”: the doll, the automaton, the wax figure—all disturb because they resemble the human but lack consciousness. They are, in effect, vessels haunted by the suggestion of life. In this context, the puppet becomes a stand-in for the body emptied by trauma—a body through which emotion and memory can be performed, but which does not (or cannot) speak in its own voice. To view the puppet as a vessel is to recognise it as a symbolic site of projection—a body through which the unspeakable can be enacted at a safe emotional remove.

Jordan Wolfson

Wolfson's work is characterised by its confrontational nature, aiming to elicit strong emotional and psychological responses from viewers. He often employs familiar cultural symbols and narratives, recontextualising them to challenge perceptions and provoke critical reflection. His pieces frequently blur the lines between reality and simulation, compelling audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about society and themselves.

Coloured Sculpture (2016)

Jordan Wolfson's *Coloured Sculpture* (2016) is a highly controversial and affectively charged artwork that merges advanced animatronics with brute repetition, moral discomfort, and psychological intensity. Presented as a life-sized boyish puppet shackled by heavy chains to an overhead rig, the figure is violently dragged, dropped, and suspended, often while maintaining unsettling eye contact with viewers. It blinks, rolls its eyes, and locks onto individuals through facial recognition technology—appearing disturbingly alive even as its body is subjected to mechanised abuse (Kaack, 2016; Higgins, 2018). *Coloured Sculpture* occupies the terrain between performance, robotics, and installation. The figure's exaggerated cartoon features and overalls evoke American pop-cultural references—most notably Huckleberry Finn and Mad Magazine's Alfred E. Neuman—archetypes of white boyhood innocence and mischief that Wolfson deliberately distorts and subjects to violence (Kurian, 2016; Wolfson in Stedelijk Museum, 2016).



Figure 5. Colored sculpture, 2016

Mixed media

Dimensions variable with installation

This visual innocence stands in stark contrast to the scripted violence that the figure undergoes: it is violently flung, slammed onto the platform, and dragged in silence. This jarring juxtaposition intensifies the psychological unease of the viewer. The work deliberately collapses the boundary between object and subject. The figure is lifeless, and yet, it watches you. The uncanny nature of this affective relationship is central to the work's impact. As Hal Foster (2016) notes, the uncanny today is often "technological, tied to the living machine," and Wolfson leverages this tension to confront audiences with their own discomfort and complicity.

The puppet-like figure—cartoonish, infantilised, and repeatedly brutalised—can be read as a symbolic surrogate through which the artist negotiates personal psychological terrain. Wolfson has openly described his work as a means of accessing and externalising unresolved emotional states, stating in interviews that he uses art to "witness" his unconscious and give form to inner conflict ("Jordan Wolfson: Manic/Love," *Stedelijk Museum*, 2016). Unlike traditional catharsis, which implies emotional release, Wolfson's work operates more like a repetitive compulsion—a compulsive re-enactment that mirrors the way trauma often resists closure.

The automation and physical detachment of the puppet may initially suggest emotional disconnection, but this distancing allows the artist to confront violence in a mediated, controlled way. As psychoanalytic theory has long suggested, repetition is one of the central mechanisms through which trauma attempts to find legibility (Freud, 1920).

The constant repetition of the puppet's abuse echoes the recursive nature of trauma itself. The boy doesn't bleed or cry, and yet the violence remains difficult to watch. Percy Sledge's *When a Man Loves a Woman* plays in the background, adding a layer of romantic nostalgia that heightens the dissonance. As art critic Nicole Kaack (2016) observed in *artcritical*, the repetition serves not only to dull sensitivity to violence but to expose "the economy of brutality in which spectators are complicit." The viewer is suspended in a state of ethical paralysis—able to observe, unable to

intervene. Ajay Kurian (2016), writing in *Artspace*, argues that the figure should be seen “not as a victim, but as an avatar of white male entitlement” caught in its own self-destruction. The work thus critiques not only the spectacle of violence but its *institutional and racial framing*, particularly in a time when visibility, surveillance, and empathy are unevenly distributed across different bodies. Wolfson’s *Coloured Sculpture* is not about narrative trauma but about its structure—its cyclical, repetitive, affectively blunted form. It embodies a kind of haunted choreography of control, forcing viewers to reckon with their role as passive witnesses. The installation also functions architecturally: the figure is suspended within a defined perimeter, fenced off from viewers by a metal barrier. This division reinforces the separation between observed and observer, yet implicates both within a shared system of spectatorship and silence. It is an installation about distance, not only spatial but moral and psychological.

Art as Exorcism

Throughout this dissertation, art has been explored as a space in which trauma is externalised, refigured, and felt—through the haunted house, the fractured body, the puppet, or the image. Whether in Louise Bourgeois' *Cells*, Jordan Wolfman's uncanny puppet plays, or Nan Goldin's raw photographic sequences, artists return again and again to the site of emotional injury—not simply to represent trauma, but to *act upon it*. In this light, art becomes not only a container for memory, but a performative tool for transformation. They do not offer straightforward healing, but instead allow individuals and communities to revisit wounds in symbolically structured forms. Julia Kristeva (1982) describes this as working through the *abject*: the psychic material that threatens the boundaries of self and must be purged through confrontation. Art becomes the stage for such confrontation, where shame, horror, or grief can be enacted safely at a distance, through surrogate forms.

Diana Taylor (2003) expands on this idea in her distinction between the *archive* and the *repertoire*. While the archive preserves memory in static, textual form, the repertoire transmits memory through performance—through the body, gesture, and repetition. Art that externalises trauma through ritual and repetition engages the repertoire, enabling embodied memory to be passed on, felt, and reimagined by others. As evidenced in the work of the artists examined here, the act of returning to pain is often ambivalent, unresolved, and cyclical. Yet it is precisely this ongoingness—the refusal of finality—that makes the work of art an effective vessel for transformation. Rather than sealing trauma in silence or forgetting, these practices acknowledge its persistence, giving it form, rhythm, and meaning.

Reflexive Note

This dissertation began as an academic inquiry but has, in many ways, mirrored the emotional contours of my own creative process. As I've written about trauma, embodiment, and memory, I've also felt them—sometimes unexpectedly—in the texture of words, the return of certain images, the gaps that refused to close. Writing, like making, has become a form of encounter: with ghosts, with language, with the parts of myself I've often struggled to articulate. The artists I've studied here have not just influenced my thinking—they've offered models for survival, for shaping pain into something shareable. Their works helped me to understand that research can be both rigorous and vulnerable, critical and personal. In foregrounding my own embodied experience, I've tried to honour the complexity of what it means to live with memory—not as something static, but as something continually forming and deforming in the act of expression.

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to explore the question: *How do past traumas shape artistic expression and identity?* Through an interdisciplinary analysis of contemporary art and film—spanning sculpture, installation, animation, and moving image—the inquiry has traced how trauma manifests not only thematically but materially, spatially, and psychologically. From the private sites of memory to the public spaces of witnessing, the research has examined how the language of art becomes a means of survival, communication, and transformation. Drawing on theories of auto-ethnography, hauntology, psychoanalysis, and embodiment, the study has shown that trauma resists linear resolution and is often experienced as a recursive, affective force. It distorts time, disrupts narrative, and lingers in both the mind and body. What has also become clear is that trauma-based art does not only function on a personal level. As the dissertation progressed, attention turned toward the collective function of such artworks—their capacity to foster public empathy, emotional literacy, and communal witnessing. Drawing on theorists such as Jill Bennett (2005), Diana Taylor (2003), and Cathy Caruth (1996), the dissertation argued that when artists externalise trauma, they create not just personal exorcisms but cultural interventions. Public imagery that bears the trace of pain invites viewers to reflect on the complexities of suffering—offering not spectacle, but resonance. In doing so, art becomes a performative and affective space where unresolved experiences can be revisited and refigured. The idea of art as *exorcism* emerged in the final chapter as a synthesis of many of the dissertation’s conceptual threads.

Through this research, the original question—*How do past traumas shape artistic expression and identity?*—has been answered not through a singular thesis, but through a constellation of insights: trauma shapes art through fragmentation, material metaphor, repetition, and the uncanny. It leaves traces in the surfaces and structures artists build. It speaks through symbols, surrogates, and spaces. And perhaps most importantly, it reveals that identity is never fixed but is instead continually negotiated through the act of making. Future research might build upon this work by looking further into audience reception and the ethics of witnessing in trauma-based art, particularly in the digital age, where images of suffering circulate rapidly and often without context.

Similarly, there is space for further study into non-Western and decolonial approaches to trauma, healing, and collective memory in contemporary art—areas that were beyond the scope of this dissertation but remain crucial for expanding its frameworks. Ultimately, this dissertation has argued that art is a potent and necessary site for exploring the afterlives of trauma. It is where the unspeakable can take form, where memory can live in matter, and where pain can be transformed—not erased, but reshaped—into something shareable, inhabitable, and deeply human.

Bibliography

- Adams, T. (2022) 'The big picture: Nan Goldin explores the destructive power of intimacy', *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/mar/27/the-big-picture-nan-goldin-explores-the-destructive-power-of-intimacy> (Accessed: 30 April 2025).
- Ahmed, S. (2004). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Bachelard, G. (1994). *The Poetics of Space* (M. Jolas, Trans.). Beacon Press. (Original work published 1958).
- Bennett, J. (2005). *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*. Stanford University Press.
- Bernadac, M.-L. (1995). *Louise Bourgeois*. Flammarion.
- Betterton, R. (2006). *Unframed: Practices and Politics of Women's Contemporary Painting*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Blanco, M. del P., & Peeren, E. (2013). *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*. Bloomsbury.
- Blessing, J. (1996). *Kiki Smith: A Gathering, 1980-2005*. Walker Art Center.
- Bochner, A. P. (2014). *Coming to Narrative: A Personal History of Paradigm Change in the Human Sciences*. Left Coast Press.
- Bourgeois, L., quoted in Morris, F. (2008). *Louise Bourgeois*. Tate Publishing.
- Bronfen, E. (2004). *Home in the Noonday Sun: The Uncanny in the Work of Louise Bourgeois*. In G. Perry (Ed.), *Difference and Excess in Contemporary Art: The Visibility of Women's Practice* (pp. 77–90). Oxford: Blackwell.

- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Chare, N., & Watkins, L. (2011). *Representing Agamben: Towards an Ethics of Witnessing*. Bloomsbury.
- Derrida, J. (1993). *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Routledge.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An Overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1).
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*. AltaMira Press.
- Fisher, M. (2014). *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Zero Books.
- Foster, H. (2016). *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency*. London: Verso.
- Freud, S. (1919). *The Uncanny. (Das Unheimliche)*.
- Freud, S. (1919). *The Uncanny. In The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (Vol. XVII)*. Hogarth Press.
- Gil, E. (2006). *Helping Abused and Traumatized Children: Integrating Directive and Nondirective Approaches*. Guilford Press.
- Goodman, E. (2015) '30 Years On, Nan Goldin's Unflinching Ballad Is Just as Powerful', *Hyperallergic*. Available at: <https://hyperallergic.com/264354/30-years-on-nan-goldins-unflinching-ballad-is-just-as-powerful/> (Accessed: 30 April 2025).
- Gordon, A. (2008). *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. University of Minnesota Press.

- Grundberg, A. (1986). "Nan Goldin's *Ballad of Sexual Dependency*," *The New York Times*.
- Higgins, C. (2018). "Jordan Wolfson: 'This is real abuse – not a simulation'." *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/may/03/jordan-wolfson-puppet-violence-colored-sculpture-tate-modern>
- Hoffmann, J. (2009) *Kiki Smith*. London: Phaidon Press.
- Holborn, M. (2016). "Nan Goldin's *Life in Progress*." *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/07/04/nan-goldins-the-ballad-of-sexual-dependency>
- Jones, A. (1998) *Body Art: Performing the Subject*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kaack, N. (2016). "Master of Puppets: Jordan Wolfson at David Zwirner." *artcritical*. <https://artcritical.com/2016/06/27/nicole-kaack-on-jordan-wolfson/>
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia University Press.
- Kotz, L. (1992) 'Nan Goldin: Witness and Participant', *Artforum*, 31(2), pp. 96–101.
- Kurian, A. (2016). "The Ballet of White Victimhood." *Artspace*. <https://www.artspace.com/magazine/contributors/ajay-kurian-on-jordan-wolfson-colored-sculpture>
- Kwon, M. (2002). *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. MIT Press.
- Martin Parr Foundation (n.d.) *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. Available at: <https://www.martinparrfoundation.org/product/the-ballad-of-sexual-dependency/>
- Meyers, D. (2006) *Feminist Perspectives on the Self*, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- MoMA (2016) *Nan Goldin: Artist Profile*. Available at: <https://www.moma.org/artists/7532-nan-goldin>

- *MoMA (2016) Nan Goldin: The Ballad of Sexual Dependency. Available at: <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1651>*
- *National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) (2006). Louise Bourgeois: Cell (Glass Spheres and Hands). Available at: <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/louise-bourgeois-cell-glass-spheres-and-hands-2> (Accessed: 30 April 2025).*
- *Nixon, M. (2005). "Bourgeois and Beuys: The Ethics of the Personal." In October, 113, 35–56.*
- *Nixon, M. (2005). 'Bad Enough Mother', October, 71, pp. 71–92.*
- *Peiffer, P. (2024). "Nan Goldin." The Museum of Modern Art. <https://www.moma.org/artists/7532-nan-goldin>*
- *Posner, H. (2005). Kiki Smith. Monacelli Press.*
- *Roach, J. (1996). Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance. Columbia University Press.*
- *Sante, L. (1992). "Introduction," in The Ballad of Sexual Dependency by Nan Goldin.*
- *Solomon-Godeau, A. (1991) Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices. University of Minnesota Press.*
- *Stedelijk Museum (2016) Jordan Wolfson: MANIC / LOVE. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum. Exhibition materials/interview.*
- *Taylor, D. (2003). The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas. Duke University Press.*
- *Van der Kolk, B. (2015). The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma. Penguin.*