

The Art of Memory

Annie E Coombes

*Dreams used to come in the brutal nights
Dreams crowding and violent
Dreamt with body and soul
Of going home, of eating, of telling our story
Until, quickly and quietly, came
The dawn reveille:
Wstawàch.
And the heart cracked in the breast.*

11 January 1946, Primo Levi, *The Truce*, 1958

Written in the year following his liberation from Auschwitz, these words form the preface to the second volume of Primo Levi's moving and immensely humane account of his incarceration in one of the most notorious Nazi death camps of the World War Two. Less a testimony to the experience of internment, the poem speaks rather of the dissolution of any chronological time frame that would enable a clear distinction between past, present and future. It also speaks of the painful realisation that release from the physical confines of the camp does not signal release from the vagaries of memory.

Among the many lessons which have been learnt through the witnessing and testimony collected in the aftermath of genocide, war or systematic political repression is the impact of trauma on memory and the distinction between narrative memory and traumatic memory. A feature of this research has been an increased understanding of the necessity of maintaining an ability to conceptualise consecutive time. As Susan Brison has suggested, 'The ability to envision a future along with the ability to remember a past, enable a person to self-identify as the same person over time. When these abilities are lost the ability to



Reconstructed women's isolation cell, 80 x 180 x 200 cm, at the exhibition 'Art en Detention/Camp de Kham/Sud Liban' with detainee's work behind

Reconstructed male isolation cell, 90 x 90 x 90 cm, with detainee's work behind





Embroidery made in 1991 by Farida Irislan. Made from part of a sleeping bag, a piece of sweat-shirt and threads from a pullover. The embroidery reads: 'La meilleure resistance, c'est une parole juste face a un tyran'.



Woven boat made out of unraveled clothing by Nohman Nasrallah



Embroidery made by Soha Bechara as a present for the International Red Cross. Made in 1996 just after the Red Cross had gained admission to Khiam for the first time but before they had been able to introduce material and resources to the prisoners. It is constructed from pieces of djellaba and thread from trousers and unraveled socks.

- 1 Susan J Brison, 'Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self', in *Acts of Memory, Cultural Recall in the Present*, eds Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer, University Press of New England, Hanover and London, 1999, p 44. See also, *Trauma, Explorations in Memory*, ed Cathy Caruth, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1995 and *Tense Past, Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, eds Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, Routledge, New York and London, 1996.
- 2 Since 1992 the Galerie Nikki Diana Marquardt has been involved in a series of exhibitions and other cultural events ('Project for Europe') dealing with the conflicts and contradictions of lived experience in a Europe whose political, economic and cultural boundaries are constantly being reconfigured. These have included, 'Language, Mapping and Power', *Imagining Ireland* (1996); 'Idemo Dalje, Tuzla' (1996); 'La Vie en Temps de Guerre, Three Algerian Photographers' (1998); 'Sarajevo a Ciel ouvert' (1998).
- 3 'Algerie...je ne quitterai jamais mes amis' (1997); 'Massacres', Isidro Romero' (1997); 'La Vie en Temps de Guerre', Nadia Benchallal, Bruno Boudjelal, Hocine Zaourar' (1998).
- 4 See also, Julie Flint, 'Israel's torture jails exposed, forgotten victims of Lebanon war seek justice', *Observer*, 20 February 2000, p 23.
- 5 Amnesty International, *Les Detenus de Khiam. Tortures et Mauvais Traitements*, May 1992; Amnesty International, 'Appel Medical, Israel / Sud Liban, Suleiman Hassan Ramadan', October 1998. See also, David McDowell, *Lebanon: A Conflict of Minorities*, Minority Rights

have or to be a self is lost as well.¹ This is the more fundamental loss expressed by Levi's poem and the legacy which any ex-prisoner faces to a lesser or greater degree.

For those who have been incarcerated without trial, whose 'crime' is never defined and whose sentence is never delineated, whose days are structured through the destabilising vacillations of terror and the unknown on the one hand and of stultifying boredom on the other, and who often face these fears in complete isolation, the trauma which psychologists now recognise as being due to a total erosion of the ability to identify oneself as a subject is extreme. Under such conditions how is it possible to avoid irreparable collapse and breakdown and to later recover a life which is capable of dealing with the new stresses of the banal quotidien? And what is the possible relation between this struggle and the pages of an art journal? In some senses these are precisely the questions which 'Art in Detention/Camp of Khiam/South Lebanon' was concerned to answer.

Amidst the splendours of the Place des Vosges in one of Paris' chicer quarters, cheek by jowl with the trendy couture houses of Issy Miyake and Kenzo, Galerie Nikki Diana Marquardt makes an odd neighbour. Opened in 1986 Marquardt has had a consistent policy since 1992 of curating exhibitions which are explicitly confrontational and aimed at exercising her publics' capacity to make difficult political judgements.² In each case multi-media cross-cultural events prioritise the particularity of the contribution of the visual and the activity of making. In the contemporary art scene generally this is a fairly rare agenda now but in the Parisian art world where, since 1968, any relation between contemporary art and politics (in anything but the most general sense) has been strenuously occluded, it constitutes an exceptional bravura. Especially given the nature of the political conflicts she chooses to foreground and their proximity to French domestic political preoccupations. The season of Algerian exhibitions, conferences and soirees in 1997 and 1998 was a case in point.³

We are quite used to the elaborately disavowed exoticism of multiculturalism or 'global' 'world-art' extravaganzas as a technique of engaging cross-cultural concerns. They are so often couched in terms of claims to this and that identity that there is something refreshingly maverick about a gallery which takes the time to elaborate on the specific social and political conditions pertaining to individual countries, regions or cities (Algeria, Ireland, Palestine, Sarajevo) and whose artists are also attentive to this. Yet the exhibitions in the Galerie Marquardt cannot be easily dismissed as pedagogic moralising – though they certainly avoid neither elucidation nor moral and ethical judgements. They are often the result of conceptually rich collaborative projects which foreground praxis and process.

'Art in Detention/Camp de Khiam/Sud Liban' essentially showed the work of ex detainees who had been held in the detention centre at Khiam on the South Lebanon border in the Israeli occupied territories. At the time of writing, some 144 men, women and children remain in the camp.⁴ Created in 1985, the detention centre has only recently achieved a grim notoriety internationally since up until 1995 no human rights organisations were admitted to Khiam and little was known of the appalling conditions there despite published reports from some who survived to tell the tale of their detention.⁵ Since 1995, when the International Red Cross was granted limited access, Khiam has become known to human rights organisations as a place of internment without either trial or the prospect of any due legal process and where torture is endemic. The inmates at Khiam fall into various categories. They may be Lebanese who are members of organisations actively engaged in armed opposition to Israel's presence in

Group International,
London 1986 and with
update February 1996.

Lebanon such as Hezbollah. They may have refused to collaborate with or to enlist in the army of the occupying forces (the South Lebanese Army [SLA]) or they may be journalists who have publicly denounced Israeli occupation. They may have been picked up on suspicion of 'terrorist' intentions or they may simply be local Lebanese or Palestinian residents (men, women and children) who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Either way, as one Israeli journalist in the *Middle East Report* put it, 'We will never know if they were draft resisters, tax evaders or senior Hezbollah officials. In Khiam, there are no judges, trials, lawyers, evidence or arguments. There is no law or judiciary.'⁶ As is so often the case in war, those who bear the brunt of the fighting on both sides are women, children and other civilians or soldiers too young to know what it is that they are fighting to preserve. The fact that some criticism of Khiam has come from journalists within Israel is a measure of the degree to which a growing constituency are more concerned to have a sustainable peace in the region than to continue to defend ideological positions at any cost.

As the Galerie Nikki Diana Marquardt is careful to point out, Khiam is not the only camp of its kind in the world where 'the conditions of detention are in clear violation of various Geneva Conventions' or indeed of other breaches of human rights.⁷ Marquardt's agenda is rather to demonstrate through the example of Khiam 'this vital need to create in the most inhuman and insupportable circumstances'.⁸ Certainly the exhibition achieves this but it is worth analysing quite how it is that a disparate collection of small handmade objects arranged on shallow shelves around the walls of the gallery can assume such grandiose characteristics. The point I want to make here is that there is something more at stake than evidence of some kind of soothing or even cathartic occupational therapy.

At first sight the exhibition space looks like nothing so much as a bazaar from a local community centre, where possibly sales of produce or crafts are being marshalled in aid of some worthy cause. Except that the two containers in the centre of the gallery make incongruous companions. These, we are told, are the isolation cells which have been reconstructed according to detailed specifications from Soha Bechara who was detained for ten years in Khiam for allegedly attempting to kill Antoine Lahad, the leader of the South Lebanese Army. Imprisoned and tortured at the age of 21, Bechara spent six of her ten years in detention in solitary confinement in an isolation cell measuring 80x180x200 centimetres. The even smaller male isolation cell, measuring 90x90x90 centimetres completes the ominous pairing in the gallery. Bechara was released in September 1998 after pressure from an international human rights campaign and has been a constant presence at the gallery during the exhibition. On my recent visit there she made a compelling companion. Examining the isolation cell it defies imagination to connect this slight but vibrant individual with such devastating containment and deprivation. Part of this denial comes from the stark physical experience of the cell in relation to our own bodies and our incredulity that such a space could possibly sustain life. The unavoidable somatic response to the isolation cells is heightened by the miniaturised scale of the objects interrupting our peripheral vision.

In fact, in many ways the structure of the exhibition space itself could be understood as a metonymic representation of traumatic memory. In other words our experience of the space and the display is primarily physical and profoundly disruptive. The threatening implausibility of the relative spatial registers of both cells and objects shake our confidence in our own judgement. Many commentators have remarked on the somatic nature of traumatic as opposed to narrative

6 Aviv Lavie, 'Never, Never Land. On Khiam Prison in Southern Lebanon', *Middle East Report*, Spring 1997, p 34.

7 In particular, August 12 1949 'Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War'.

8 Galerie Nikki Diana Marquardt, Press Release, 16 November 1999.

memory, 'full of fleeting images, the percussion of blows, sounds, and movements of the body – disconnected, cacophonous, the cells suffused with the active power of adrenalin, or coated with the anaesthetising numbness of noradrenalin'.⁹ The fragmentary nature of this somatic recall carries with it temporal repercussions. In my discussion with Souha Bechara she drew attention to what she described as the central paradox of detention without trial.¹⁰ The received idea of prison, which owes much to Foucault, is of a disciplining institution where the regime of punishment and surveillance effectively works to contain ultimately by means of self-regulation.¹¹ Most accounts of prison life talk of the numbing routine and of how one's life is partitioned by the bells which regulate the monotonous features of each day, waking, washing, eating, working, eating, washing, sleeping, etcetera. The paradox Bechara invokes is that, in a place like Khiam, fear destroys any sense of order, routine or discipline and consequently any clear sense of time. Chaos not order is the reigning emotion. She spoke of the destabilising effects of hearing cries issuing from neighbouring cells and of the terror of not knowing either what was happening or who was next.¹² At such moments the self-imposed discipline of exercising in her cell must have seemed unbearable though she is adamant that this regime helped to keep her alive. Perhaps it is useful to understand this regime as also an effective way of imposing physical divisions which mimic a lost temporal structure. As we now know, holding on to the possibility of a past, a present and the prospect of a future is essential in order to stem the dissolution of the self in conditions where everything conspires against the memory or imagining of any of these.¹³

It is also clear that for the detainees the process of making and preserving the objects on display in the exhibition was another means of marking time (productive time) in a context precisely designed to eradicate it. They are a means of witnessing, not the terrible conditions under which they were made, but their makers' ability to transcend such conditions against all odds. According to Bechara many of the detainees expressed the concern that their time in detention should not simply be 'lost' time. The objects they made became an embodiment of nostalgia for misplaced lives but also and crucially they became evidence of lives spent productively – of an 'other' existence.

Another aspect of the exhibition which recalls the process of traumatic memory is the apparent disjuncture between the physical and emotional deprivations imposed on the detainees and the almost whimsical nature of some of the objects they have made. One of the results of Levi's own experience in the Nazi death camps and one which Charlotte Delbo also recalled on her return to Paris after liberation was the terrible erasure of their capacity for feeling.¹⁴ 'The survivor must undertake to regain his memory, regain what he possessed before: his knowledge, his experience, his childhood memories, his manual dexterity and his intellectual faculties, sensitivity, the capacity to dream, imagine, laugh.'¹⁵ Given what we know of the appalling conditions inside Khiam the extraordinary playfulness of many of the objects made by the detainees assumes a shocking gravitas.¹⁶ These objects become an insurance against forgetting and thus against the loss of personhood through reinstating the capacity for fantasy.

Before the Red Cross were allowed into Khiam in 1995 the detainees had no tools or materials with which to make, write or read. And yet each person's exhibit contains an extraordinary array of tiny items meticulously crafted in wool and cotton unwound from their own clothing (socks, djellabas and t-shirts) or sleeping bags and sewn with needles made out of fish bones or electrical wiring. Other objects are constructed out of paper reclaimed from packaging on food or

9 Roberta Cuthbertson, 'Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-Establishing Self', *New Literary History*, 26, 1995, p 174, cited in Susan Brison, *op cit*, p 43.

10 Interview with Souha Bechara, 22 January 2000.

11 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Allen Lane, New York and London, 1977.

12 Interview with Souha Bechara, 22 January 2000.

13 See footnote no 1 and Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, Basic Books, New York, 1992.

14 Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1995; Primo Levi, *The Truce*, Vintage, London, 1996.

15 Delbo, *op cit*, p 255.

16 Bechara spoke of the terrible repercussions if any of the detainees were found either making objects or with objects in their possession.

toilet paper. Bechara's section of the exhibition contains the corner of a foil wrapper from the triangular portion of a 'Vache Qui Rit' cheese segment as evidence of the detainees' creative use of the foil as an improvised writing implement. Other objects are made from the pips and fibre salvaged from a meagre meal. On one shelf lies a wooden comb in the form of a woman's silhouetted form seductively posed in tight red v-neck and jeans, another takes the shape of a different mythic siren – a mermaid. Tiny crocheted hearts sit beside a minuscule woven boat and on another display miniature socks represent each woman detained in Khiam. Some of the objects take on a surrealist quality. One little toothbrush with pink raffia handle and frayed raffia bristle has more of the quality of a fairy's tutu than an effective piece of dental hygiene equipment. Indeed many objects invert the functions they would normally assume in life outside and poignantly signal the deprivations of the camp. Prayer beads are painstakingly manufactured out of fabric or pips covered in cotton or silk thread which effectively silences the characteristic clink of the beads as they rub together. They thus recall the regime of silence imposed on the detainees and the prison authority's effort to eradicate a sense of either community or self. Heart-shaped photo frames elaborately padded in rich satiny fabric and decorated with beads and threads (materials made available only after the Red Cross visits) stay empty with loved ones represented by verses of the Qur'an or simply by names in place of the faces which should fill the void. We are necessarily reminded of the terrible isolation at Khiam and the absence of human contact with the outside world. Even more poignantly, in most cases the objects were conceived as gifts for wives and husbands, lovers and children despite the certain knowledge that they would never reach their destination (certainly before 1995). Thus they become a means of keeping community alive. They also embody the ideal of a future.

Bechara talked of the grave penalties meted out if the guards discovered any objects in the detainees' cells. She described the desolation on the faces of detainees after their cell had been ransacked in one of the frequent and unannounced strip searches when any objects were maliciously burnt by the prison guards. On such occasions if only one tiny object remained undiscovered this constituted a monumental victory. They became a means of undermining the prison authority's attempts to shut down communication between prisoners since often the exchange of objects and materials was the only form of contact available in a regime of silence. In addition, considerable skills and specialist techniques were required to manufacture these tiny items by men and women who had never sewn, embroidered, carved or crocheted before. The patient determination to perfect such techniques for miniaturised versions was a skill passed down from generation to generation of detainee. Bechara talked of the way that acquiring such skills was an important form of self development and self expression in a context where both were actively suppressed. Gradually the objects around the gallery take on another dimension – quite literally.

It may be useful here to recall Susan Stewart's work on the gigantic and the miniature where she advances the proposition that the gigantic should be understood as 'a metaphor for the abstract authority of the state and the collective, public, life'.¹⁷ The miniature, by contrast, should be understood as typifying 'the structure of memory, of childhood and ultimately of narrative's secondary (and at the same time, causal) relation to history' and that 'its abstraction of the mirror into microcosm, presents the desiring subject with an illusion of mastery, of time into space and heterogeneity into order'.¹⁸ While Stewart is primarily concerned to map the miniature as 'a metaphor for the

17 Susan Stewart, *On Longing, Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1993, p X11.

18 Susan Stewart, *op cit*, p 172.

interior time and space of the bourgeois subject', the insights of her analysis highlight the special and poignant significance of the miniature's relation to 'the invention of the personal' once the context and conditions of production and exchange are shifted to the economy of a detention camp such as Khiam.¹⁹

If, as Andreas Huyssen has suggested, there is a way in which monumentality paradoxically encourages forgetting by rendering the past invisible, the array of miniature objects in Marquardt's Gallery constitutes a much more effective and multi-faceted form of commemoration.²⁰ By invoking the personal, the naive and the fantastic despite the grim context of political suppression and resistance they signal the complexity and contradictions of sustaining the self while also desiring membership of an ideal of political community. It is in the end the touching intimacy of these clandestine activities in contrast to the alienating impersonality of the reconstructed cells that provides the most moving testimony.

Finally, while the circumstances of the exhibition and the very private nature of the objects might seem to place the viewer in an impossibly voyeuristic relation to the detainees, it is also apparent that we might fulfil another role. Much research on trauma suggests that as a way of 'mastering' trauma the survivor needs to objectify it and that this can only occur 'when one can articulate and transmit the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside.'²¹ Thus we may unwittingly become a step on the road to translating traumatic memory into narrative memory through our uncomfortable viewing of this collection of objects-becoming-exhibits and the unbearably poignant testimony to which we necessarily give witness.²² And yet, I would argue that the real force of 'Art in Detention' lies precisely in its materiality – that is in the fact that objects not narratives are its staple. It is precisely the maintenance of the yawning gap between the bleak isolation cells and the intimately conceived objects that preserves what Cathy Caruth has termed the traumatic event's 'essential incomprehensibility, the force of its affront to understanding'.²³ And perhaps after all it is this affront which needs to be kept alive in order that we learn from the horrors of the inhumanity recalled by Primo Levi's poem and which returns to haunt us in every centre of detention where individuals are kept in isolation without trial and without hope.

Since writing this article the notorious prison at El Khiam was finally liberated on the 23 May 2000 following the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon. During the last 15 years more than 2000 people have been imprisoned in its cells.

Thanks to Soha Bechara, Nikki Marquardt and Sophie Mouron.

19 Susan Stewart, *op cit*, p X11 & 172.

20 Andreas Huyssen, 'Monumental Seduction', in eds. Bal et al, *op cit*, p 192.

21 Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *op cit*, p 69.

22 Cathy Caruth, *op cit* p 154-155, discusses Claude Lanzmann's attempt in his film *Shoah* to refuse a narrative of explanation or understanding in order to maintain the shock and horror at the impossibility of imagining such events.

23 Cathy Caruth, *op cit*, p 154.