

ART, VIOLENCE AND TRAUMA

Sexual Abuse¹ in the AAO — Trauma-theoretical and ethical Thoughts on Art from violence Contexts

— by Esther Hutfless

Trigger warning: This text broaches issues of physical, psychological, emotional, and sexualised violence and may trigger stressful feelings, memories, or flashbacks. In some places, personal descriptions by former children of the Mühl-Kommune are quoted. These passages in the text are indented and set in a smaller font size. Please be circumspect and decide for yourself whether you want to read these passages or skip them.

At the latest when Otto and Claudia Mühl were arrested and sentenced in 1991, as well as based on numerous testimonials² of former members published since the break-up of the AAO³ commune, the extent of the authoritarian structures and physical, psychological, emotional, and sexualised violence pervading the “Kommune”⁴ cannot be denied — even if it is probable that just a fraction of what happened has become publicly known.⁵ Yet until today the mainstream in art and cultural studies — but also many former communards of the “1st generation”, that is, those adults who joined the “commune”

1 With the term of sexual abuse I adhere to the juridical definition in Austrian criminal law, which therewith describes explicitly sexual assault of adults on children and adolescents. Also see the definition by Dirk Bange (Bange 1996: 105).

2 On this see, e.g., the film *Meine keine Familie* by Paul Robert Julien (<http://www.meinekeinefamilie.at/>), Vilma Pflaum's reports about her growing up in the Kommune (Schlembach 2018) as well as her published artistic diploma thesis with the title *aufzeichnen* (recording) from 2015, the reports of former members of the Kommune on the site Re-Port (<https://www.re-port.de/>, last accessed 2023/1/4), Andreas Schlothauer's publication (Schlothauer 1992), and the interview with Hatschepsut Huss (Bogner 2013).

3 Abbreviation for action-analytical organisation – in everyday conversation mostly just called “Mühl-Kommune”.

4 I am putting “Kommune” in quotes in order to put a critical perspective on the AAO's self-designation as a “commune”. Is it adequate and meaningful to continue using the term commune in view of its hierarchical, authoritarian leadership structure and the copiously documented violence children especially were subjected to?

5 However, there were single critical reports rather early on. On this see, e.g., Rumler 1977.

voluntarily — hold on to the notion that Otto Mühl's ideas such as liberating nuclear family, man and their sexuality, uniting art in life in the "commune" in a revolutionary project, and establishing action analysis and self-expression as "therapeutic" methods for the liberation of man⁶ have to be regarded as artistically groundbreaking interventions critical of society into prude Austrian post-war society which justifiably had to violate borders.⁷ This reception of the "commune" at Friedrichshof and the art of Otto Mühl as a revolutionary project does not only deny that these border violations very concretely violated the borders of numerous people who followed Otto Mühl of their own free will or were children involuntarily at his mercy — and that of other high-ranking men and women within the "commune"; in a way, it continues the violence and border violations with other means: Once again, the former victims are put into a position of powerlessness — now with respect to museums, galleries, art dealers, and social and art historical discourse. The exploitative relationship, too, remains intact. While the people in the AAO had to make over their property and savings to it, and their workforce and sexuality were exploited, now the art created in this context of violence is profitably exhibited and sold. Including pictures showing former underage abuse victims naked; there are the so-called *Aschebilder* (ash pictures) created by Mühl from the appropriated and incinerated diaries of former communards.⁸ Many still consider Mühl a genius artist, criticism of him and the "commune" is warded off with the reprimand that it is motivated by reactionary discourses. But in a general social context

6 For Mühl this was not just about the liberation of man, but the creation of a "new" human being. We can find such notions — which can be attributed to fantasies of omnipotence — time and again in totalitarian regimes, not least in National Socialism.

7 The inability or unwillingness to engage in a critical discussion of the former AAO-Kommune and the figure of Otto Mühl may be owing to financial interests in the shape of exhibitions and the sale of works just as much as to individual, sometimes also unconscious inner conflicts which definitely remind one of the inner psychological dynamics delineated by the psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich in *Die Unfähigkeit zu Trauern* (*the inability to mourn*). By way of the end of the Nazi regime, Mitscherlich's describe the difficulty of dealing in a critical manner with the person one so passionately identified with and through which one was valorised oneself — the Führer. According to them, critical reassessment of National Socialism failed because people unconsciously could not let go of the Führer ideal, as this would on the one hand have implied acknowledging the reality of the crimes and therewith one's own complicity, but at the same time would have meant the revocation of one's valorisation which was tied to the Führer (cf. Mitscherlich/Mitscherlich 2012)

8 Cf. Elisabeth Schäfer's text in the book on hand.

and numerous institutions, too, one is repeatedly confronted with the defense and exculpation of perpetrators, while the victims of sexualised violence have to face *victim blaming*,⁹ stigmatisation and allegations of pathological behaviour and hysterics. In this way, the former victims often suffer re-traumatisation and find themselves in situations where aspects of the original situation of power and abuse are repeated, e.g., by relativising their own perception and their trauma, or reducing them to their role as victims by pathologising them, thus robbing them of a significant voice in the discourse.

Here, I would also like to disclose my own position in the discourse — the position I am writing from. As a psychoanalyst who works clinically and theoretically on sexual abuse, over the last years I got to know some of the former children who grew up at Friedrichshof. I worked in victim protection for a long time and accompanied victims and survivors¹⁰ of sexual abuse in legal procedures. Therefore, I see myself solidary and biased in favour of the victims of sexualised violence, and I believe it to be politically important to take this position.

In this text I want to deal with the trauma-theoretical and ethical questions resulting from an art production and subsequently its reception, too, that cannot be separated from violence, abuse, and exploitation. Although the text on hand treats the Mühl-“Kommune” exemplarily, it points beyond that with regard to the question of social responsibility.

The text pursues a dual concern. On the one hand, it wants to speak to those who have experienced abuse and violence, hoping to be able to provide support on the difficult path towards trusting one's own perception again, finding a language for the violence suffered, and overcoming the internalisation and repetition of abuse dynamics. Sexual abuse mostly takes place in close relationships between adults and children, it confuses one's own perception, prevents thinking and thus

9 Victim blaming means that victims are believed to have a share in the blame for what happened. To this I would also count the offender-victim-reversal which can often be observed: Victims making acts of violence public are charged with encroaching on the offenders. The allegation of wanting to promote cancel culture or of being especially woke is also often brought up against the victims of violent acts or socially vulnerable groups in order to keep them in a position of suppression and silence them. For me, these strategies are also victim blaming.

10 So as to sidestep the rather rigid term “victim” and to highlight the processuality of continuing life after experiencing sexualised violence, speaking about “survivors” of sexualised violence has become quite common usage today.

the possibility of talking about it. That is one of the reasons why people who experienced sexual abuse in their childhood keep silent for so long and are unable to make public what happened. Another reason is the fear — and often this fear is not unfounded — that society will not take seriously the violence one experienced, trivialise it, and that eventually it is the victims who become social outcasts and not the perpetrators (cf. Kavemann et al. 2016: 71ff).

On the other hand, the text also wants to speak to those people in the discourse of cultural studies and art history who curate exhibitions with the works of Otto Mühl or trade his works on the art market, and therefore also bear social responsibility regarding how to deal with abuse in our society not only in this specific case, but also at large.

ON THE SPECIFIC SITUATION REGARDING ABUSE IN THE AAO

Abuse at Friedrichshof took place in manifold ways. Adults and children of either sex were abused, but also art itself, and moreover therapy as a method of treating psychological afflictions and human sexuality.¹¹ Everything — people, art, sexuality, therapy — was put into the service of an ideology. Violence and abuse were thus legitimated ideologically with reference to sexual liberation and the creation of a new human being. Ultimately, this served to maintain the power of a ruling class within the commune, to which many other men and women apart from Otto Mühl belonged.¹²

Being exposed to these multiple forms of violence physically, sexually, psychically, and emotionally, led to far-reaching and complex traumatisation especially of the children who grew up in the AAO without their conscious or explicit consent, either because they were born at Friedrichshof or because they were brought there by their parents.

In order to make these massive forms of violence the children experienced in the AAO more graspable for readers, and to provide some

11 Cf. the workshop “AA-Kommune: Kommen – Bleiben – Gehen. Befreiung durch: Kunst – Sexualität – Therapie?” at the Volkskundemuseum Wien from October 15–17, 2020, organised by the FWF Peek project “PERFORMING PRIMAL COMMUNISM. (Re)writing of Reality Through Discourse”.

12 On the ideology and structure of the “commune” see, among others, Nordhausen/Billerbeck 2000: 183 ff. and Schlothauer 1992.

insight into the psychosocial conditions the children at Friedrichshof grew up in, I would like to cite some exemplary as well as fragmentary excerpts from testimonials.¹³ They do not come from therapeutic materials which are subject to confidentiality, but from published reports. I am aware of the problem that testimonials always also meet with readers' voyeurism, and that this may contribute to further victimisation. In spite of this, I decided in favour of citing them in order to oppose the quite often practised relativisation of the deeds, and to make the voices of former victims audible / legible here, too. In my many years of working with survivors of sexual abuse I repeatedly experienced that for the surroundings, for outsiders, for legal procedures it is necessary to keep reminding that this is about children who are, and were, subject to violence — even if today we look into the faces of adults telling us about it — so that we may at least begin to understand the extent of the events. So, when you read the following lines, think of yourself or of your child as a 10 year old boy, as a toddler of 17 months, as a 4–5 year old girl!

“The mother of a boy about 10 years of age lived in Germany in a city group. She came for a visit to Friedrichshof. She arrived just when a ‘children’s palaver’ was held. Before she was even able to say hello to her son whom she had not seen for weeks, Otto Mühl said to the mother: ‘your son behaved badly, give him a slap in the face.’ The mother boxed her son’s ears openly in front of many communards before even saying hello to him.”¹⁴

“That day, when my son Boris (my child was only 17 months old!) during the palaver wanted to sit on my lap and not on the bench with the other children, he was reported to Mühl by Eva, after which Boris was brought into the middle. Mühl grabbed Boris’s ear and led him, crying and protesting, around in the middle, every three steps kicking

13 In the following I will refer to materials from the Re-Port site, a website run by former members of the Mühl-“Kommune” (<https://www.re-port.de/>). The entire life at Friedrichshof was documented with video recordings. These records partly include scenes of sexual abuse (and were available to the investigative authority during the criminal procedure against Otto and Claudia Mühl) as well as scenes of physical and emotional violence as they took place daily, e.g., during the palavers or the self-expression evenings at Friedrichshof. A large part of the material is still in the archive of the collective at Friedrichshof. I was able to view smaller parts of the material — of course, excepting scenes of abuse — in the course of the scientific reassessment by the Peek project. Numerous descriptions of everyday life in the “commune” which illustrate the prevailing permanent violence there can also be found in Schlothauer 1992.

14 From: <https://www.re-port.de/otto-muehls-verbrechen/>, accessed 2023/1/15.

his butt. After several rounds he was weeping even louder, and I was sent out. Through the half-open door I could see how Boris was made to sit with the upper women, where he cried very desperately. After a short while he tried to crawl away, but was held back. I heard him cry ‘no, no, no!’ At which Mühl said: ‘He’s still not done yet, he still hasn’t had enough!’ and brought him back into the middle again. Then I was fetched in again, and Mühl did action analysis with Boris, pressing his belly and breast. Boris screamed. Then Mühl lay down on him and pressed him to the floor until he stopped struggling. [...] On the next day the children’s palaver took place outside. Under the strong midday sun, Boris got thirsty and wanted to drink from my breast (I was still breastfeeding). But this was not allowed during the palaver. So he was reported for whining. I had to take him to Mühl. Boris began to cry, Mühl held his breast towards him and said: ‘Here’s the boob, now come on, don’t you want my boob?’ When Boris wanted to crawl away, he pulled him back by his leg. Several times he let him crawl away a bigger distance and then every time pulled him back by his leg more strongly, until my child cried for me loudly. I was sent away and told to hide. Boris was not allowed near me until the evening and was immediately assigned to a children’s group. Later I heard that he had continued to cry for several hours.”¹⁵

“I have very concrete memories of assaults from Otto. I was only 4–5 years old then, maybe even younger. I already knew when I was little that what Otto did with me was forbidden ... and that I was not allowed to talk about it to anyone. And later Otto told me that we children must not talk about it among ourselves. And I also knew that he kept it a secret from the mass, the other people. He regularly took every opportunity to abuse me. At night, but also during daytime.”¹⁶

“At that time the children sometimes were already taken away from their mothers with 3 weeks. Otto did not want these close relationships between parents and children. There was no one who took care of you as a child personally. If you were punished, no one asked how you felt or whether you got sick from it. Or, e.g., the children’s palaver which took place daily, where one was publicly humiliated or punished, no one asked how you coped with it.”¹⁷

15 From: <https://www.re-port.de/melanies-bericht/>, accessed 2023/1/15.

16 From: <https://www.re-port.de/nenas-bericht/>, accessed 2023/1/15.

17 From: <https://www.re-port.de/nenas-bericht/>, accessed 2023/1/15.

Violence already begins with the destruction of trustful relationships, and guarantees the preservation of power and control. On the children's side, the destruction of relationships leads to their being unable to confide in anyone, that they stay completely alone with their experience of violence and their mortal fear¹⁸, it leads to children not being able to find a language for what is happening to them. On the contrary, we can imagine that the normalisation of violence as it took place in the "commune" has the effect that own perception and feelings are questioned to such an extent that perhaps the experienced violence cannot even be perceived as such, because there is no concept of growing up free from violence. A contemporary witness who involuntarily grew up in the "commune" and who wants to remain anonymous says: "I was not disappointed. I had no other, happy childhood so that life in the 'commune' could have disappointed me. I had only the life there. I did not know that there could have been another life for me as a child."

The American psychiatrist Leonard Shengold called the devastation such complex situations of violence bring about in children *soul murder* (Shengold 1989). Children growing up in such violence contexts are subconsciously forced to develop strategies to survive psychically and physically. They adapt, they behave inconspicuously and become invisible, they try to do everything well, be liked and fulfill expectations, maybe they also become "perpetrators" by giving away others to protect themselves, sometimes perhaps they are glad that someone else gets it, which at the same time plunges them in massive guilt conflicts, ... Conforming to the abuse situation so as to survive is called *Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome*. The psychiatrist Roland Summit described this syndrome as follows: "Children learn to accept the situation and to survive. There is no way out, no place to run. The healthy, normal emotionally resilient child will learn to accommodate to the reality of continuing sexual abuse" (Summit 1983 and 1993).

This integration into the abuse situation in childhood and adolescence creates certain unconscious relationship and defence patterns deeply inscribed into the personality. Survivors of sexual abuse and

18 Think of the above description where Otto Mühl lies on an infant in order to discipline it — we can perhaps only get an inkling of which fears this must have triggered in the baby; think of the brutality of sexual abuse and violation, which may trigger just as massive mortal fear in children and adolescents.

violence often suffer from this as adults, too, and it may curtail one's own capacity to act or lead to the repetition and reactivation of destructive relationship structures, e.g., when something or somebody unconsciously reminds one of the former violent relationship. Through these patterns of relationship and defence, experiences of abuse and violence can also be passed on transgenerationally and find expression in the psychic structure of subsequent generations.

ON THE PSYCHODYNAMICS OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Sexual abuse pervades our society — based on empirical studies, the estimate is that at least 4 to 9 % of all children in Germany and Austria are victims of sexual abuse¹⁹. At the same time, sexual abuse is still a taboo topic. Satz ersetzen durch: Many victims, but also many who are confronted with the topic, are rarely aware of the specific psychodynamic situation that arises out of sexual abuse and of its consequences. Therefore, I would like to elaborate a bit on the abuse situation.

Sexual abuse means a traumatisation wilfully brought about by people — as opposed to a trauma caused by, e.g., a natural disaster. And if a trauma was caused by people, then it is not irrelevant whether they were close and trusted attachment figures a child depends on who perpetrated, supported, or condoned the act of violence. In the vast majority of cases, sexual abuse takes place in relationships of trust, so that it is a violation of the relationship, too. Moreover, sexual abuse is often characterised by a repeated act of violence over a longer period the end of which the child can neither anticipate nor influence, which may lead to the experience of massive feelings of powerlessness.

My colleague Sonja Wohlatz — formerly long-term director of *Tamar*, a Viennese information centre specialised on counselling and accompanying people who in their childhood experienced sexual abuse — once described sexual abuse as border violations of the body, of understanding, of the psyche, and of the generations and the conditions of

19 Cf: Mikado study “Missbrauch von Kindern: Aetiologie, Dunkelfeld, Opfer”, Germany 2015, University of Regensburg and others., https://beauftragte-missbrauch.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Materialien/Publikationen/Expertisen_und_Studien/Expertise_Haefigkeitsangaben.pdf; last accessed 2026/3/11. According to the definition of abuse — e.g., if sexual harassment and exhibitionism children are exposed to are included — studies get results of up to 20 % of concerned girls and 10 % concerned boys (Gründer/Stemmer-Lück 2013: 9).

authority. The term border violation intends to point out explicitly that the boundaries of others are not observed and not respected; and here, sexual abuse — due to the stage of development of children and their lack of knowledge and experience — presents an especially perfidious border violation, because the sufferers mostly only notice that there was a border when it has already been transgressed (vgl. Enders 2019: 78 f.) This experience of having been “enticed” or drawn across a border can lead to serious confusion and uncertainty, to distrust of one’s own self or to its devaluation, and subsequently also to mistrust of all current and future relationships.

The special Situation at Friedrichshof includes — which makes the issue of abuse even more severe — that trustful relationships were prohibited ideologically, and were already destroyed before the actual sexual abuse began. People yearning for emotional closeness and two-person relationships were deemed marred and disturbed. In order to drive out the “Kleinfamilienwichtel” (nuclear family gnome), not only private property but also any relationship between people was communalised in a destructive manner (cf. Nordhausen/v. Billerbeck 2000: 188).²⁰ The destruction of relationships can be considered as a part of the abuse dynamic, and we encounter it in most cases of sexual abuse where perpetrators attempt with different means to drive a wedge between the child and the potentially protecting attachment figure. So, the children at Friedrichshof were isolated, often unable to confide in anyone, and in the long run were on their own. But in fact, every child feels a need for relationship and attention. It is a need which ensures its own survival. In the AAO-“Kommune”, “love” and “care” were available when one was especially good at implementing Otto Mühl’s ideology, when Mühl took a fancy to one or thought that one did something exceedingly well.²¹ A situation like this makes children especially vulnerable. What basically distinguished the AAO-“Kommune” from “classical” families was that there is still an outside in families. Children who experience sexual abuse

20 On the ideology of the Mühl-“Kommune” see, e.g., the regularly published AA news. Also see the timeline established by the Peek project “Performing Primal Communism” with contributions on the development of the AAO and Friedrichshof: <https://fh-timelines.goldblo.cc/>, last accessed 2023/1/21. This timeline presents a participative site whose content was provided by the team of the Peek project as well as former communards.

21 Apart from that there were of course also constellations where care and love could be given in secrecy, which however was contrary to the ideology and practice of the “commune”.

in their family get into inextricable conflicts: if one parent is the abuser, the child is torn between the possibility of talking to someone about what is happening and at the same time endangering the continuance of the family and its own home, and the possibility to keep silent and continue to endure the violence — but also to protect the family. In the AAO-“Kommune” there was no outside, and therefore no possibility to reach out to someone. The “commune” thus became a totalitarian system of violence everyone was subjected to. It cut itself off increasingly from the outside world. Contacts with people who were not part of the AAO were prohibited for children of the “commune”. Except for the ideological writings of the leader Otto Mühl, reading books was forbidden. Offences were prosecuted in despotic acts of public exposure and humiliation in so-called “palavers”.²²

How sexual violence is experienced and which effects it has depends on the entire context in which it takes place. Apart from that, the child’s state of development and personality play a role, the type and intensity of the relationship with the abuser, but also the reaction of the child’s immediate environment. Looking away and not believing can also be traumatising.

Aside from few exceptions, sexual abuse does not begin with the rape or sexual assault of the child or adolescent, but almost always with special attention towards the later victim (Enders 2019: 75).

At first the child experiences special attention and enjoys it. The transition from alleged loving care to sexual violence is often a smooth one. In the first moment the child often does not notice when the border is transgressed, feels complicit and guilty, which subsequently prevents it from confiding in someone. The guilt feelings are confirmed by one of the abusers’ most common strategies: “You wanted it yourself, didn’t you, you enjoyed it!” The longer the abuse continues, the more guilty the victim feels, and the more difficult it becomes to seek help from someone, if at all this is a possibility. Children often face the threat that they would destroy the family, that they would have to go to a children’s home and the abuser to jail if they tell anyone about it. This, too, feeds the victim’s guilt feelings (ibid.: 83–95).

This shows that the thought processes and behaviour of perpetrators,

22 This information comes from conversations with former members of the “commune”.

the offender dynamics, are essential for understanding the victim's psychodynamics (cf. Gründer/Stemmer-Lück 2013: 68 f. and Enders 2019: 55 ff). Offenders have a distorted, perverse reasoning that justifies their deeds: "I can do what I want with my children!"; "Children also have a sexuality, what I'm doing is healthy and beneficial!"; "She/he really likes it!" Offenders re-define the victim's behaviour: "She/he didn't put up any resistance!"; "She/he kept coming back to me!" and interpret this behaviour of the child as consent. These perverse — one could also say, twisted and distorted — thought processes of the abuser are what gets inscribed in the child, too, and leads to its feeling guilty, while the offender mostly fantasises itself as being the passive part seduced by the child.²³

Sexual abuse upsets the child's trust in its own environment which it depends on, and which should provide protection and security. Through the transgression and the sexual — often also sadistical — excitement a formerly familiar, perhaps even beloved person suddenly becomes an alien, menacing person. A trustful relationship suddenly becomes a frightening one. Sexual abuse is experienced as life-threatening fear by many children and adolescents. Younger children especially often are unable to comprehend what is happening to them when they are confronted with sexualised violence. They have no language for this. Quite often fear and other negative feelings are so great and overwhelming that symbolisation through language is impossible (Enders 2019: 132 ff.). But the child's fear also emerges in connection with the possibility of the "secret" becoming public, implanted in them by the abuser through manipulation to secure their control over the child (ibid.: 84 ff.).

Between the child and the offender there is an imbalance of power, the child in its entirety becomes the adult's pure object of need satisfaction, by which it is massively devalued. It is robbed of the right to self-determination, the forms of resistance a child may take recourse to are ignored by the offender, the child's will is broken. The children feel powerless and hopeless, they experience that their own possible courses of action have no effect at all. Everything is felt to be void of hope and meaning (ibid.: 142 ff. and 78 f.). Since children cannot prevent sexual assaults on them, and since sexual abuse presents a threatening situation accompanied by helplessness, loss of control, and fear, and overrunning

23 On offender types and strategies see: Gründer/Stemmer-Lück 2013: 63 ff.

the psychological coping mechanisms, complex defence mechanisms often begin to take shape in order to enable the psyche to survive. Often splitting mechanisms develop: The victims frequently experience dissociative states, affects and experiences are separated from each other, which can result in a feeling of being outside of one's body during the act of abuse (Gründer/Stemmer-Lück 2013: 31). Such defence mechanisms can inscribe themselves so deeply into the psyche that they become an automatism in later life, and crop up in totally common stress situations, in which this massive form of protection actually would not be necessary, and renders the sufferers incapable of action.

While the abuser mostly externalises their own negative parts and transfers them to the victim — with the consequence that the child thinks that it is its own fault, and feels bad —, the victim often internalises and idealises the offender so as to make the situation bearable and not have to give up the beloved person on whom one depends: “it's not so bad”, “I wanted it myself, I enjoyed it”, “the abuser is poor and sad, I am comforting them”. Due to its identification with the offender, the abused child loses its existence as an independent subject, it is made into an object even more and gets entangled in the abuse dynamics (cf. Enders 2019: 147 f. and Gründer/ Stemmer-Lück 2013: 25).

As I have tried to show, violence and abuse situations can lead to aspects of the abuse relationship being internalised by the child, and repeating themselves in all later relationships — with one's own children, with partners, in friendships or in work contexts. In later real life, such repetitions again and again result in considerable psychological strain, former victims feel that they cannot trust anyone and suffer from commitment problems, relationships get sexualised, aggressions turned against oneself. Victims of sexual abuse often are unable to stand up for themselves and their needs, or become rigid and incapable of action when something or someone reminds them of the abuse situation (Gründer/Stemmer-Lück 2013: 25). Various fears and feelings from the original abuse relationship can be transferred to current relationships in manifold ways. If, e.g., one experiences feelings of dependence or a lack of self-worth, this may lead to accusing or blaming other people in current relationships or an unconscious wish to destroy them. Or, if former victims — in order to survive — introjected exclusively the offenders “good” aspects so as to stave off their fear of them, in adult life

this may lead to their keeping up toxic, abusive, or violent relationships, as — according to the old pattern — here, too, only the violent person's positive aspects can be seen, and the victim comes to the offender's defence again and again.

ETHICAL AND TRAUMA-THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON THE TREATMENT OF ART FROM VIOLENCE CONTEXT

As is known, the term 'trauma' is ancient Greek and means 'wound'. Initially this points out to us a causal connection, a scene in which the wound was inflicted. At the same time, today we understand trauma mainly as the psychological consequences of this wound which in the majority of cases stay throughout one's life. So, a trauma is a wound that never heals completely, an injury that cannot be removed and psychologically affects one's whole life. A wound which sometimes tears open again or is kept open, e.g., when the violence that caused the trauma continues — be it in the same shape or in another one through new and different violent contexts.

Today we know that the seriousness of traumatisation and the victims' possibilities to continue life and find ways of treatment for themselves not only depends on the immediate violence inflicted, but also on whether after such an act of violence close and trustful attachment figures believe the victims, whether they are able to offer support, protection, and security, or whether they deny what happened, perhaps even are accessories who let the abuse happen, or in the worst case themselves offenders. How society deals with sexual abuse is also important for the survivors of sexual abuse. Is it possible to make abuse public, to denounce and condemn it? Are injuries inflicted on the victims taken seriously and acknowledged? Or are abuse and its consequences minimised, hushed up, and the perpetrators protected?

Although the individual treatment of abuse belongs in the protected space of a therapy, dealing with abuse on a more general level is also a matter of public society, and therefore of the discourses in art and cultural studies if — as in the case of the Mühl-“Kommune” — art and violence ultimately cannot be separated.²⁴ It is society, it is all of us who

24 Cf. the introduction to the book on hand.

can stop or prevent sexual abuse by not averting our eyes, taking childrens' sufferings seriously, not belittling abuse, and not protecting offenders.

What a travesty, what an insult it must have been for the former victims when a few weeks after his release Otto Mühl was courted by the Austrian and European art and culture scene in a grand appearance at Vienna's Burgtheater, and once again got the chance to trivialise the abuse in public? What an injury and retraumatisation for all those abuse victims visible as naked minors in Mühl's pictures, which today are still exhibited in museums or sold in galleries? What does it mean for all those who were exposed without protection to abuse and violence in the "commune" to perceive that a convicted criminal obviously is worth more in our society than the victims who are devalued anew by this?²⁵

The ban on speaking is immanent to sexual abuse. Therefore, one of the main issues of survivors of sexual abuse is to overcome their inner and outer speechlessness. Moreover, it is about having the experience that others believe what they say, that the injuries sustained are taken seriously, that society does not protect offenders but victims.

Not only for the former children of the Mühl-"Kommune", for all human beings and children who have experienced or do experience sexual abuse, as well as for all children who will experience sexual abuse in the future, a responsible treatment of the issue of sexual abuse in society, solidarity with and partiality to the victims is necessary. In connection with the Mühl-"Kommune" and the art that was created there, this could mean naming the conditions of its creation and the violence entailed, and to contextualise the art of Otto Mühl radically from this perspective. Where there is violence, there always is responsibility, too! The responsibility of the abusers, but also the responsibility of society. Accepting this responsibility may perhaps help people who experienced severe traumatisation to feel a bit more secure in the present than in the traumatic past.

25 Cf. the text by Georgia Doll in the book on hand.

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