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Reflections on a Fragment

Uwe Herrmann

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As a child, I felt determined to become an archaeologist – someone digging up hidden, often fractured, sometimes beautiful things that act like lenses. Things that help us to look at and better understand the past. I must have been about eight years old when I recovered a fragment of a putto head from a dilapidated, overgrown drywall in my street. It was missing its upper part, the stone split across the eye line (fig. 1). Though searching, the head's missing part, including most of the eye section, stayed lost. I remember feeling compelled to take it, 'rescue' it from oblivion, to give it dignity and a home. And I remember my strong wish to keep looking at it.

Five decades later, I must admit to my younger self that I did not become an archaeologist, but an art psychotherapist. As a profession, it may have much in common with archaeology. Holding mental and emotional fragmentation, helping splinters of memories - or what is thought of as memories – to surface and to transform through the making of art is archaeology of sorts. My putto fragment, I understood as I grew older, was debris of my home city, consumed by the last war not quite twenty years before I was born. Our homes were built on a landfill containing some of the old city's relics. Buried with this material debris were the immaterial memories: the untold stories, secrets and 'ghosts' of the war generations that raised us. Ghosts are said to make themselves known in various, normally unpleasant ways until their fate has been properly acknowledged by the living. Since I was a boy, I have learned a few things about post memory and about the crucial role of the creative act in externalizing introjected trauma. I have also learned to find words for the stories that the adults I grew up with would not, or could not, tell.

When I went to live in other cities and countries, the putto fragment was the one small thing I always packed, and wherever I put it was 'home'. I have drawn it many times (fig.2), and decades later cast copies of it in beeswax for installations. One of these installations was called Mnemosyne, referring to the Greek goddess of memory, from which the nine muses and their arts have sprung. Among the transitions the fragment has gone through in my artwork, the one I loved most was its rebirth in beeswax (fig. 3), a material that, to me, has a tender, soothing quality. In some of the cast pieces, the liquid wax sometimes happens to restore some of the missing eye section. Looking back, I do not find it in the slightest way surprising that as an art therapist I have spent more than three decades working with blind children. I feel an interest in,

and tenderness towards, their artwork, as towards them, that touches upon what I felt as a boy discovering the rejected, half-buried putto fragment.

Fragments represent something larger that is lost. They can be puzzling, sharp, sometimes haunting, and make us ponder about the unknown, irretrievable form they once were part of. In art therapy, this search for the ‘full picture’ goes beyond the patient; it also includes the reasons that once drove us towards our profession. They are crucial to understand if we want to be useful to our patients. Across five decades, my putto fragment pinpoints some of my own reasons – already active in the eight-year-old, transformed and better understood today.

Fig. 1: Putto fragment, found object, 15 x 10 x 8 cm

Fig. 2: Drawing of a Fragment, 1987, pencil on grey paper

Fig. 3: Mnemosyne (part view), beeswax, wire and wood, 2005

Biography

Uwe Herrmann, PG Dip AT, MA, PhD, trained in fine art at Hanover University and art therapy at the University of Hertfordshire and Goldsmiths College, London. He practises at the State Training Institute for the Blind in Hanover, Germany with blind and partially sighted children, adolescents and young adults. Since 2000, Uwe teaches on the MA Art Therapy at Weissensee Academy of Art Berlin, where he was appointed visiting professor in 2014 and course leader in 2024. He has lectured and published widely in Germany, the European Union, the UK and South Korea.

Contact Details: ukherrmann@yahoo.de