

# Art as an antidote to early childhood trauma

*Translation of article that appeared in 'Artsenkrant' magazine – 18 May 2018*

From 19 May, De Tank in Bruges hosts the exhibition 'The art of surviving'. Through her powerful work, creator Veerle Van Wassenhove brings the impact of early childhood trauma out of the shadows and makes it visible and tangible for her audience. 'I am systematically left with the feeling that I have to keep up a double life', says the artist.

Artist Veerle Van Wassenhove tells her own story: a remarkable testimony in which the terms 'psychologically vulnerable' and 'psychologically wounded' are interchangeable.

## My story

'Although there is a wealth of scientific literature about childhood sexual abuse, people find it difficult to imagine it actually happening. Along my own journey towards recovery, I came to realise that, if I wanted to heal fully, I needed an audience. My suffering at the hands of my parents started at a time when they were my entire world. *From my childlike perspective, the whole world has failed me and the only way I can only right that wrong, is by speaking to the whole world.* Because I was traumatised long before I had the words to express myself, it makes sense that I start to 'speak' using images. My work tells the story of my life before I had words of my own.'



As a little girl I couldn't run or fight, but adrenaline helped me to lock away the lethal, life-threatening information somewhere inside my head. Temporarily lost, it was painting, amongst other things, that helped bring it back. To find the strength to do this, I needed to feel valued by those around me. This meant there could be an interaction between my secret world (in which I was used as an object and felt I was nobody) and the real world (where I felt valued and appreciated) and that the lava-like stream of angst and sorrow could flow out of me. This gave me the chance to take the death that was ingrained in me, and transform it into life.

## Inclusion

'It's therefore obvious to me that I need others. And the people I need most are those who are courageous enough to connect to the darkness in me. They encourage me to embrace my wounds and include them in my very being. They help me channel my organic and existential rage, so I don't do any more harm to myself or others. They help me cope with the legacy of being the child nobody cared about. In a larger sense, they help prevent the hatred being passed on from one generation to the next. Together we can attempt to heal 'the family', this institution that is the cornerstone of our society.'

## Social stigma

'My chances of becoming a suicide statistic were much greater than my chances of survival. Which meant that the chances of me spending my lifetime as a psychiatric patient, tucked away under a stifling diagnostic label (which doesn't say anything about what happened to me), were much greater than the chances of me becoming an individual with a story to tell.'

## My hope

Through my experiences, I've come to the conclusion that severe psychiatric disorders are more often than not caused by early childhood trauma. In my opinion, the term 'psychologically vulnerable' should be replaced by the more accurate 'psychologically wounded'. In future, I hope that when we speak of severe psychological suffering, the emphasis will be on finding the cause instead of focusing on a 'diagnosis'. I believe that such a shift would help destigmatise the victims of such trauma.

'I am reaching out to you, as doctors, to help me advance on this path I've taken and continue to take to make my existence and story known, shedding all taboos. I invite you to communicate with me about early childhood trauma, past all taboos in a joint attempt at dialogue.'

**Excerpt from my diary:**

So now what?  
On my retina, streams flow into rivers  
And beyond  
To oceans from one to the other  
From me to others  
In my belly a knot unravels  
And wraps arms and legs together  
This contour  
The clock has stopped  
Between me and myself, time and tide. The distance.  
Like a mousetrap. Split second. Life or death.  
Open or shut.  
Beyond ancient walls. Chipped away.  
Searching for paths.  
Like leaves covering a trap  
Will it carry my weight?  
Deep, deep hole, abyss.  
An abyss within me.

My dearest abyss.  
And at the bottom:  
The ground  
Black, black chasm  
At the bottom:  
The ground  
And in between: oceans and streams to rivers  
And me, learning to swim a little  
Someone on the shore

Tears ebbing  
I can see it now

**Veerle Van Wassenhove**

Exhibition in 'de Tank': The art of Surviving. Burg 5 in Brugge.  
Opened Friday 18 May, 2018. Information: [www.theartofsurviving.be](http://www.theartofsurviving.be)

**Original article**

<http://theartofsurviving.be/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Schermafbeelding-2018-05-23-om-14.28.32.png>