



This is the accompanying essay in Mem Sevenster's catalogue for her 2012 installation *FIVEL ETTER WORDS OTHER TUNES*, held with her fellow UNISA graduate students at The Lovell Gallery, Cape Town. This was her final practical artwork presentation for her BVA (Bachelor of Visual Arts degree, UNISA).

Well, you might say that I came under the spell of repetition and aggregation...I was always standing at the center of obsession, over the passionate accretion and repetition inside me.

(Yayoi Kusama cited by Hoptman et al 2000:10).

Introduction

Two to three percent of the world's population is affected by Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) (www.understandingocd.tripod.com/ocd/facts/statistics.html), and this exhibition explores its impact on the behavior of affected persons. OCD is sometimes referred to as 'Brain Lock' (Schwartz 1997:XV) because four key structures of the brain lock together, resulting in the brain's sending messages that are false but not recognized as such by the affected person. This exhibition comprises five separate but consciously integrated works which communicate my experiences with OCD by highlighting my own obsessions, primarily a fixation on the number five. I will also examine the works of other artists who deal with the subject of obsession.

Background and personal experience

In religious structures, chanting and other ceremonial rituals are performed as acts of redemption to save sinners from the power of evil. Although I consider these false belief systems to mirror my own false brain messaging, similarly I carry out repetitive thoughts and behaviors in an attempt to ward off mental illness. This manifests in my



sound installation, *Repeat after me*,ⁱ which requires the viewer to repeat the phrase “ah- ah- ah- e- ah” in his or her mind, and so participating in my chanting ritual.

My OCD manifests primarily with a fixation on the number five. Also, I feel driven to submit to a rigid set of self-imposed rules, performing certain physical acts, such as finger tapping, or acts that occur only in my head, like obsessive chanting.

Researched artists and my work

As I am preoccupied with the number five, so Yayoi Kusamaⁱⁱ (b 1939) is obsessed with dots, accumulations and repetition (Hoptman et al 2000:44), seen in her work *Airmail Stickers* (1962) (fig ...). Symptomatically, she and I share a fear of depersonalization (Hoptman et al 2000:14), a state where one no longer perceives the reality of one’s self or environment (Harper:2010).

Wang Qingsong’s (b 1966) installation *Competition* (2000) (fig ...) shows the proliferation of the billboards of competing consumer brands, echoing his childhood recollections of China’s cultural revolution, when the walls of the cities were papered with political posters. (Modern Painters, April 2010). My wall installation *The Redemption Room* (fig ...) is papered with lists of five letter words, and pages of an OCD self-help book, as here in my mind, the revolution is between mental stability and instability. In the accompanying sound installation *Wall Sounds*, my voice repeats words from the five letter word lists.

In his work *Mayfair...* (1977-2000) (fig ...), Robert MacPherson (b 1937) reconstructed a new Australian vocabulary by reviving slang words and phrases disappearing from his society (Modern Painters, September 2010). For my works, I have deconstructed dictionaries and reconstructed them with new vocabulary formats as five letter word poemsⁱⁱⁱ.

Work methodology

Tristan Zara (1896-1963) formulated a system for creating Dada^{iv} poems (Anderson 2004:4):



Take a newspaper. Take some scissors. Choose an article in the newspaper that is the length you wish to give the poem. Cut out the

article. Then cut out each of the words that make up the article and put them in a bag. Shake gently. Then remove each cutting one after the other. Copy them carefully in the order they leave the bag. The poem will resemble you.

This reflects my way of creating abstract or ready-made poems:

I close my eyes and think of words or feelings. At random I open a book, magazine or newspaper and underline all the five letter words on the two pages in front of me, listing them and using only these words to create a single poem, which is often hard to interpret.

The script for my film *The Red Horse* was formed by automatic **writing** and two ready-made poems, *Lyssa* and *White Tiles Happy Smile Hotel*.

Visual symbolism

My visual language integrates five symbols, extended into personal metaphors. These are a red horse, a dice with five dots on each side, the symbol for copper, a pentagram and the musical symbol known as “*dal segno*” (WNWCD 2010. Sv “*dal segno*”). Five stamps were made, one for each symbol, and I repeatedly stamped these images onto the paper on *The Redemption Wall*.

The red horse carries several meanings in my work, as metaphorically I am the horse and his shadow is my mental darkness.

Most significant are the psychological interpretations. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) describes the ego-id conflict of the mind as the horse guiding the rider rather than the rider guiding the horse (D’Alleva 2005:91). Since reason guides behavior, in OCD the compulsive behavior of the id becomes disruptive and steers reason off track. According to Carl Jung (1875-1961), wild horses symbolize the uncontrollable instinctive drives that erupt from the subconscious. He maintains that the shadow



contains the unconscious aspects of a personality that have been lost, rejected or non-integrated (1964:93).

In *The Red Horse*, the horse and his shadow have been integrated as one entity, alluding to the psychosis inherent in OCD; and the fable revolves around their journey into the abyss. The abyss as a sign of depression underpins my work: “And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you.” (Nietzsche 1907:97)

My dice offers no variables, only a predictable and fixed outcome, as with OCD. The musical symbol *dal segno* (WNWCD 2010. Sv “dal segno”) instructs the musician to continuously repeat a passage of music, as my brain ‘instructs’ me to count and chant words and phrases repetitively. The copper rods suggest ambiguity: as potential conductors of ECT, yet as protectors against lightning they also stand for the OCD medication that protects the affected person from ECT. In Eastern tradition and paganism the five sided pentagram is used as a sign of protection (Nozedar 2010:124), referring to religious ritual and the behavioral rituals provoked by OCD.

Conclusion

OCD is a debilitating disorder affecting a significant number of people worldwide. Artists exploit a variety of visual symbols and engage in many forms of creative activity to both inform about and raise questions around obsession and compulsion. Kusama epitomises this when she speaks of her own artwork: “It is hard to say after all, whether these signature repetitions were caused by my disease....or by my own intention.” (Hoptman et al 2000:37).

ENDNOTES

ⁱ A headphone set will be mounted on a wall beside the words ‘repeat after me’. When the viewer places the headphone over his/her ears they will hear a recording of my voice instructing them to repeat the letters “ah- ah- ah- e- ah” after me. I will repeat this phrase a view times, increasing the tempo. It will be emphasised that the viewer repeats this in his/her mind and not aloud.



ii In 1968, Yayoi Kusama directed and starred in her own 16mm film *Self-obliteration*. In 1974 she wrote and composed *Song of a Manhattan Suicide Addict*. Her book of poems *Violet obsessions: Poems* were published in 1998 (Hoptman et al 2000:26,112,131). Kusama is also a film-maker, songwriter and poet.

iii Jacques Derrida's (1930-2004) theory of *deconstruction* (D'Alleva 2005:90) explores how knowledge and meaning are constructed. If words are the signifier and the hidden meaning of the words the signified, then the shifting play of signs causes tension between meaning and non-meaning.

iv Dada (Clarke 2001:72) was an anarchist movement which flourished between c.1915 and c.1922. The name was chosen at random by inserting a penknife into the pages of a dictionary.

v Andre Breton (1896-1966) defined surrealism as psychic automatism and stated that it reveals the true functioning of thought, referring to the unconscious acts of drawing and writing (Waldberg 1997:20).