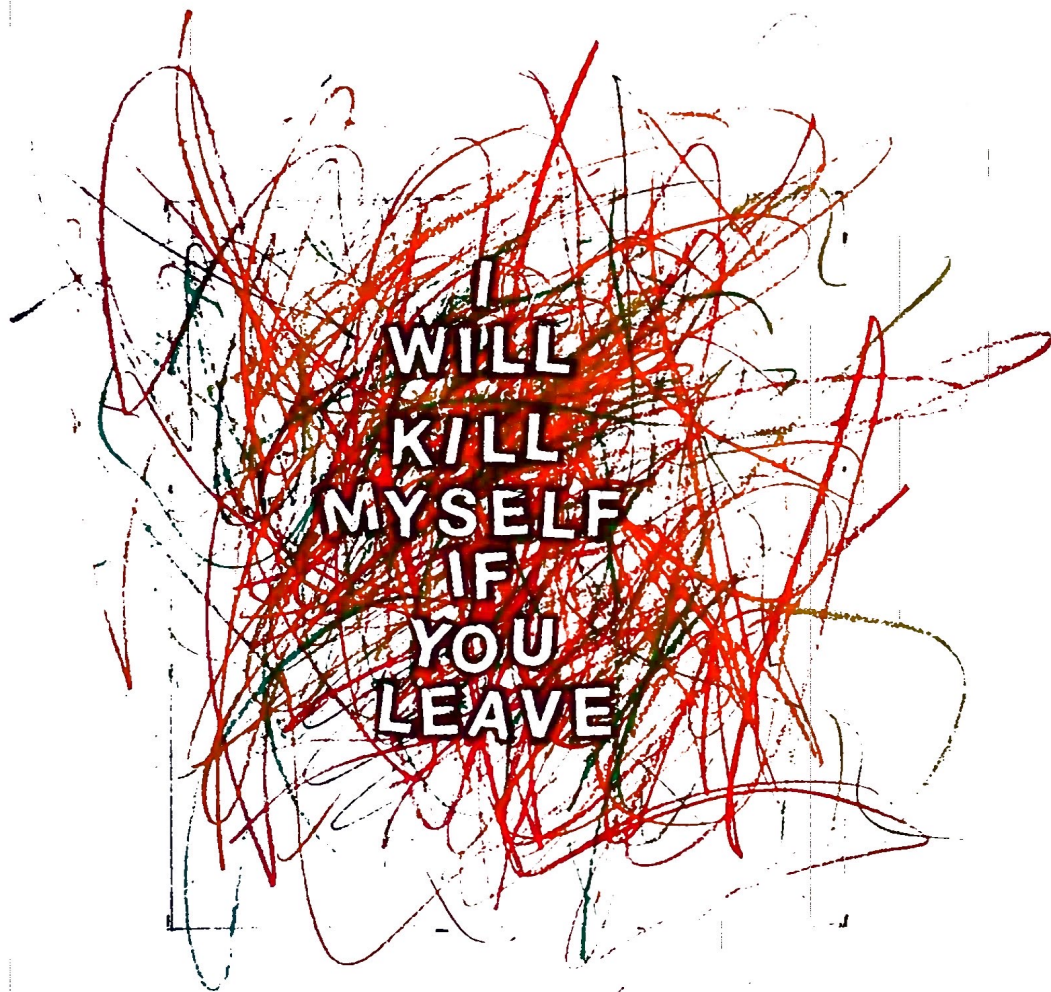


**therapy** when love turns toxic,  
can it be called love anymore?  
the systems physiotherapist  
**bertrand boutron** treats it as  
a dysfunctional survival  
mechanism. **love**

INTERVIEW BY OLIVIER ZAHM

ALL ARTWORK BY  
BETTY TOMPKINS



BETTY TOMPKINS, *SCRAWL 19*  
(*I WILL KILL...*), 2020,  
PENCIL AND COLORED PENCIL ON  
PAPER, 16 1/2 X 12 INCHES,  
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST  
AND P-P-O-W, NEW YORK

Scrawl #19

Betty Tompkins  
© 2020

## artwork by betty tompkins

OLIVIER ZAHM — As a therapist, you see people who come to you when love is going badly or ending badly, when the suffering is getting to be too much to bear. How do you treat this amorous distress?

BERTRAND BOUTRON — Like any other kind of suffering, I make no distinction between physical, emotional, and psychological suffering: the perspective is the same. It's all part of the indivisible individual. What lies behind this suffering — mental or physical — is a slowing down of exchange. We feel bad when there's a clot in an artery that slows down our blood, our biological and physiological exchanges. We feel bad when we're in a queue, in a traffic jam. It makes us tetchy — we don't feel right. Inversely, we have a feeling of satisfaction and happiness when exchanges become more fluid or speed up. That's why sport is good for us. When you race down a ski slope and slalom skillfully between the bumps, you have a momentary feeling of happiness because it resonates very precisely with your own biological self-organization.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, suffering in love occurs when exchange is blocked?

BERTRAND BOUTRON — Everything about movement and exchange that makes things easier evokes happiness, well-being. And love is part of that. When an individual is mobile in their surroundings, that mobility gives them autonomy. That autonomy then develops into a possibility of choice, which we call self-determination. Everything that holds us back or blocks us evokes a kind of suffering. And love can be one of the things that block the movement of life.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Psychoanalysis involves dealing with the problem through language, while your medium is the organism.

BERTRAND BOUTRON — Language is analogical — an analogue codification that takes what we see and feel, and converts it into signs, into a single dimension; [it does this to] something that is, by nature, multidimensional. So, it's reductive. From the outset, our cognitive system is reductive, focused, analytical. When trauma or suffering occurs — something that is the result of our physicochemical self-organization — is it logical to say that our cognitive system is superior to our physiology? Never!

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, lying on the couch and making narratives about our lives serve no purpose?

BERTRAND BOUTRON — We need to distinguish between the traumatizing events that happened to us and the mark they left. The events themselves are not permanent. The events are something that has been experienced. To go back over them is to develop a feeling of powerlessness because those traumatic events have passed. What matters to us is not the events, but the mark that we carry around in our memory — that is to say, the repetition. That which returns. That which is permanent. And inside us, this permanence consists of the organism's reflexes. It has developed a system of protection, defense, and survival when confronted with a bond that has been detrimental to it and that has blocked it in its past. This reflex is a blockage. And it can end up becoming set. Especially if you come back to it obsessively. What I'm trying to say is that the dissociation between mental and corporeal is very much written into our Cartesian and even psychoanalytical thought. By dissociating the cognitive from the corporeal and the biological, we have come to believe that we are able, with our thoughts, to reduce repetitive corporeal reflexes, the survival

reflexes that we reproduce because they have been useful in the past. This is an aberration because thought comes after perception — it doesn't come first. That is why making thought the main driver of our existence — and making language, self-narration, the path to resolving our relational problems — is simply not logical.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, you are anti-psychoanalysis?

BERTRAND BOUTRON — Psychoanalysis doesn't actually treat very much. It plays out a discourse; it gets people talking. I'm not trying to attack psychoanalysis — it's just that I've seen people who have spent 15 years in psychoanalysis who still have their survival reflexes and haven't managed to unblock a single thing by means of knowledge, of language. I have psychiatrists and psychoanalysts who come and consult with me in secret. Self-knowledge is a good thing, but it's all words. To think that you can cure by putting words together is an illusion. After all, what is curing? Curing means taking a suffering individual from a state of blockage to a state of mobility — that is to say, from a fixed state of suffering to an open, dynamic state of well-being. It is getting an individual to make this transition, not only in their mental state, but also in their biological, physiological, and corporeal state.

OLIVIER ZAHM — But in what sense is an amorous crisis a physiological, biological, or neurological problem?

BERTRAND BOUTRON — The general problem is that we confuse love with security, and loss or lack of love with insecurity. True love — or rather, successful love — is a connection with the other that is in resonance with the notion of homeostasis initiated by Claude Bernard. It is a state of biological and physiological balance leading to well-being. You just feel good, and that's all. But this "all" is really something. Love is not to be confused with the disappearance of the feeling of absence, fear, loss, or abandonment, where we enter a state of dependency and blockage, the effects of making up for something.

And that's when we start to be dependent on the other, when "I'm trying to make myself secure in relation to the insecurities in my memory," and this has nothing to do with love. The literature of love doesn't talk about love. It talks about breaking up, about abandonment, failure. Love is not something you can explain. You can't turn it into a novel. When you love, you are at peace: you love, period. This means that you're in a state of well-being with a person, in a state of free connection. You need to distinguish between a free bond and a bond based on dependence. States of insecurity triggered by a danger get our survival reflexes going, and when that happens, we immediately get caught up in a relationship of power and dependency that we confuse with love. Dependency and the attempt to soothe memories of abandonment — this is high-intensity stuff. It is the intensity of passion. It is ideal love. But it is also the intensity of despair. It is the intensity of the drowning man struggling with all his strength to get his head above water. It is not the intensity of the person who dances through their life.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, what is the right kind of love relationship?

BERTRAND BOUTRON — Basically, there are two main forms of bond. First of all, the relation of dependency, which is linked to the struggle for power and survival. This produces an acute focus on the other, and therefore hyper-projection, the idea being that the other will mend the fractures and suffering we experienced in the past. This is not love — it's insecurity looking for security. And there's no way out because the only solution is autonomy on both sides. The second connection is the opposite: it's a free bond. What is this free bond? It means being enraptured, enchanted by this other whom we love deeply, but without lapsing into dependence. I am delighted to know that the other person is there by my side, but I am not there with this chain that is blocking my mobility. Even the notion of "connection" is one I don't really

like because this notion of the bond has to do with knots.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And yet, we use chains and padlocks to symbolize love.

BERTRAND BOUTRON — That is precisely the problem. When you see all those padlocks on the Pont des Arts in Paris, you think to yourself, "There is something seriously wrong here." People want to be tied. They want security and are looking for a definitive attachment. They want certitude. They don't want autonomy. They want to recreate the absence of autonomy of the childhood world. Repetition. The same and not the Other.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Do you mean that, to love, we don't need the other?

BERTRAND BOUTRON — We don't need anyone to be able to love. To love, you must be capable of being alone, of being totally alone and autonomous. After that, you can develop a bond with someone who will also be in this experience of autonomy, and when you have two autonomies, then you can create something else. Love is two autonomies that are capable of articulating together in a fulfilling, mutual recognition.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You mean experiencing the world together?

BERTRAND BOUTRON — Yes, that is perfectly possible.

OLIVIER ZAHM — But in that case, is this free bond really strong enough? Isn't it just secondary or superficial?

BERTRAND BOUTRON — No, it's not secondary because it's not an on-off connection, a matter of lack or presence, intense because it goes from all to nothing, from hot to cold. Nor is it a focused, acute, wounding bond, oriented toward a definitive but hopeless resolution. It is a rounded connection that is constantly swelling but does not have the intensity of survival. This mellow bond has the gentleness of life, of prismatic, non-concentrated openness to existence. Rather than a struggle for power, the relation it engages in is gentle. Gentleness is not limpness,

weakness, renunciation, arrangement. Rather, gentleness is extreme subtlety, an extreme openness that enables the self to come out of itself, out of its confinement, its past wounds, and offers it the possibility of surpassing itself, inventing and creating itself. The self becomes an emerging, creative phenomenon.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Does this balance of power in love relationships bring us back to survival mechanisms?

BERTRAND BOUTRON — The balance of power is a binary relation of drives, of all or nothing, with or without you, which provokes a powerful catch-up reaction. It's the same relation as when you put your hand on a burning hot plate. You pull it away very sharply. The balance of power is something simple and binary: it is defense or attack. There is no elaboration: it's all or nothing. It's compulsive, unthinking. This leads us directly into systems of repetition.

OLIVIER ZAHM — In what way are defense mechanisms a repetition, a trap, for the relationship?

BERTRAND BOUTRON — The advantage of the binary relation, the advantage of the on-off simplicity of that relation, is its simplicity. In fusion/de-fusion — "I am with you" or "We are breaking up" — things move quickly. From love at first sight to violent separation. To survive, the organism needs simple mechanisms. The point is to be able to follow rapid reflex reactions, which are wholly conditioned by the past and have proved their worth. It worked in the past, so we start again. If you're in the street and someone sounds their horn, you step aside; there's no need to think about it — it's a signal. That is a survival relationship. And love can produce lots of signals of this kind when you are caught up in a survival relationship. The life relationship, however, is a relationship of elaboration, a relation of gentleness that does not have that passionate intensity, which is linked to survival, to fear, to danger, to abandonment. In this life relationship, you can take your time. You simply feel sure that you

have an understanding that rises or grows, and sometimes diminishes, but without crisis. And there is no notion of rivalry or anything else — because it's all about harmonics, rhythms, silences, and music, which are complete when you're with a particular person. You have two particular people, two autonomies capable of interlacing.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Can you describe the nature of a survival mechanism?

BERTRAND BOUTRON — The survival mechanism occurs in three phases, like a compressed spring. The first phase involves the closure of the organism, spasms, mental hyper-focusing. Imagine a spring that is suddenly compressed and then, in a second phase, immediately reacts in order to find a solution in relation to the danger. The third phase is managing to get back to an equilibrium. There are three kinds of reaction: attack, flight, or immobilization — one freezes things and tries to catch up, to hold back. Acting dead is a very good way of surviving. Except that, when you're frozen, the reactions are incomplete, meaning that the spring has remained compressed, and you still have the memory of an incompleteness of reaction that you try to liberate, to resolve later, when other passions arise. That is what is attractive and makes us repeat things.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Why are we attracted to this memory aspect?

BERTRAND BOUTRON — If we've remained stuck in a story of affective rupture, with our parents, for example, we will rush into love stories where we find something that has the same identity as what abandoned us and will abandon us again. We intuitively find, in the beloved, the ID card of abandonment or insecurity or emotional instability. We will give it an unconscious, essential value because we think that, here, we have a way of making up for what happened to us, of replaying it and breaking free of it. This is an illusion.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Is it possible to find a way around this defense mechanism, to avoid

reproducing the logic of abandonment and dependency? BERTRAND BOUTRON — It's hard to get beyond that. You can tell yourself the second time, or the 10th time, that things will go well, but they don't go well. Why? Because if you originally survived by staying still, then from an archaic, biological, physiological point of view, staying still has become your organism's dominant reflex. So, you're going to find yourself in an identical situation with the idea of making up for, offsetting, or canceling what happened before. But, paradoxically, there's a real chance that you will get stuck again. Quite simply because you have survived by staying static. And your organism will anticipate and reproduce this reflex — which means that you are going to remake a traumatic memory for yourself.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, what is the way out?

BERTRAND BOUTRON — The only way to get beyond this is to work on your reactions/reflexes and to probe the memory that prompted that retracting reaction/reflex: to illuminate this point of memory on survival mechanisms and to unblock these survival mechanisms, which thought is not capable of unblocking because it does not play a role in these mechanisms — and to produce other reflexes, other defenses of the whole organism. That means managing to stand clear, to step to one side, to regain mobility.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Is thought actually conditioned by these mechanisms?

BERTRAND BOUTRON — Thought is totally conditioned by these mechanisms. It is psychic suffering. We see and are conscious of things through a distorting mirror linked to this mechanism. These survival mechanisms have an attractiveness that forms a gravitational lens and deforms perceptions of lived reality. So, it's difficult to get clear of this by means of thought.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How do you work on these reflex mechanisms?

BERTRAND BOUTRON — When there is a reflex that has immobilized you, you need to replace it with another

reflex that can unfreeze you — that can make you move. Consciousness is like the needle of a hard disk that will get on to the relevant space-time of memory. You will find your physiological and biological ID for this stasis. And there, in that space-time of memory, I will be able to insert another reflex that I am going to stimulate in you. I work on physiological survival reflexes by combining them, by finding associated thoughts or memories. This is the only way of venturing into this space of memory.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How does the memory of trauma work within the memory, generally?

BERTRAND BOUTRON — We emerge from the whole of all our memories. Each lived moment makes a mark on us. We are all our memories. We are like a bubble of life in which every smallest part of the bubble corresponds to a memory. And within these memories, there are facilitating memories, memories linked to success in interactions and in exchanges, memories linked to learning, to things that have developed our autonomy. But there are also memories that are incomplete and that form structures and lumps, in this bubble of life. And there — and this is easy to model in physics — you have the relation between structure and fluidity, between these "lump" memories that aggregate and hold back memory, and fluid, circulating memories. And all these interact in accordance with the principle of relativity between body and spirit. So, you have to free up new neuronal circuits. It's very physical, pragmatic. I am not offering some New Age cosmology that goes off in all directions.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You don't believe in the exchange of energies between two people? BERTRAND BOUTRON — But you still have to determine what energy is. I am into the physics of things, biology.

OLIVIER ZAHM — But since we are these mobile, animated creatures, endowed with a soul that inanimate objects don't have, what is it that makes us come together and assemble to the point that we are unable to be apart?

BERTRAND BOUTRON — Not energies, that's for sure. The semantics of energy is extremely variable, from New Age thought to physics, etc. We lose all sense of what we're talking about, apart from the idea that energy implies a difference of potential. What is energy? We won't go into that. What I mean is that between lovers, there is an effect of recognition toward the other. And there are two main possibilities: either a mirror effect, in which the other sends us back an image of ourselves, or the opposite — the other takes us out of ourselves.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, the mirror effect is problematic?

BERTRAND BOUTRON — Yes, because if that effect of recognition is a mirror effect, then the other, in their way of being and existing in relation to us, recognizes us and our deepest failings, our lack. At that point, there is a resonance, a fusion: "You have known that, and I have known that, too." We have both experienced abandonment. So, with our two abandonments, we are going to merge, and maybe we'll make something. Here, we're getting into the fantasy called insecurity, which is very temporarily terminated in fusion — because this is bound to lead to dissociation and to a break at some point.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Do you mean that we shouldn't aim for fusion?

BERTRAND BOUTRON — No, but for a relationship based on gentleness. There, we are faced with the other in something that does not resemble us and that makes us stumble outside ourselves, with diverging harmonics that will be able to make a new, different harmony. And that is a matter of invention. For me, love is invention. And amorous passion is the opposite of invention. It is repetition, destruction. Love is the invention or reinvention of the self.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, with love, you can get outside yourself, get away from your own schemas and repetitive patterns.

BERTRAND BOUTRON — Certainly. It is a subjective astonishment because life with two people together is

not "me." Two persons together are "something else." When you have repetition, a redundancy of the self, it's passion — it's a fusion that leads inevitably to suffering. This is not love, but insecurity looking to feel secure in the similar, when it's a sideway step to the self. I am thinking of Emmanuel Levinas here — epiphany, the revelation of the other's face. This is the revelation that the other is both like me and someone else. And there, in that difference, there is an echo that is not a return, that is enriched by different harmonics — and so, the idea of two autonomies on a creative path together. Invention takes place.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It's not the opposite of fusion. It's an association, a composition.

BERTRAND BOUTRON — It's a composition, an invention. What characterizes the organism, indeed, is the ability to surf on randomness and, out of this stock of randomness, to make or invent something else. An organism confronted with a new microbe will invent a particular immune response. What distinguishes the organism is invention, the ability to come out of itself and make something that creates a stronger link with what it doesn't know.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, love is necessarily something created by two people.

BERTRAND BOUTRON — It's a creative, emerging phenomenon — something that, based on two identities, two ingredients, makes something quite different. This "something quite different" surprises both partners in the couple, and that's what's good about it: rather than the redundancy of trauma, of what we already know by heart, rather than being back with absence, rather than replaying our static position in relation to absence. That is the nature of the free bond, and the difference between the free bond and the bond of dependence. The relation of dependence is linked to relations of survival, to a balance of power. The free bond is the opposite: I am there, I know that the other exists, I can be with the other, and I can be without the other, but I know

that they exist. I can come back to the other, and I am charmed by the other. It's "ravishing."

OLIVIER ZAHM - You've got us all dreaming about this free connection, but by what miracle does it come about?

BERTRAND BOUTRON - It comes about through recognition of the self as autonomous, by touching directly on autonomy, the extraordinary thing that is our own existence.

OLIVIER ZAHM - That requires maturity and intelligence, which means getting beyond the conditioning you have described.

BERTRAND BOUTRON - Of course. If you're driven by survival, you don't have access to it.

OLIVIER ZAHM - It's not easy, even for the most intelligent people on Earth.

BERTRAND BOUTRON - It's not a matter of intelligence. It's about stepping away from yourself. But, you know, there are different ways of stepping away from yourself. Art is a way of stepping away from yourself. Poetry, in the sense that this semantic is not absolutely defined, that it leaves each person free to appropriate it. If I can make a little digression on this point, it's about distinguishing between art that I call compulsive and art that is not at all compulsive. Again, it's a matter of relations of power and relations of gentleness. There is art that offers you something, but where the artist is not there - that is to say, you can enter into this painting, and you can appropriate it and move around freely. And there is the art of compulsion, when the artist is totally set on compelling you.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Like Francis Bacon, for example.

BERTRAND BOUTRON - Yes, but Bacon did stumble, even so. That's the subtle thing here: there is compulsive art that escapes its own drives, so that there's already something inside it, in its gesture, that is out of its reach. That's why you can go and reinvent yourself inside a Bacon. But others will do something with that kind of brushwork, something that gets you in the

gut and fascinates, that gets you under their spell. We value artists who have a hold on us because this is the intensity of survival. We value the intensity of survival more than we value the intensity of gentleness.

OLIVIER ZAHM - We value Mozart's *Requiem* more than Satie.

BERTRAND BOUTRON - Well, yes, it has a focusing effect. There is a very fine book by Milan Kundera called *Testaments Betrayed*. Kundera discusses music that, for one thing, is highly redundant when it comes to the human soul and the emotions; it plunges us straight into a flux, with our memories of sadness. Romanticism. Chopin and company. We're in a direct relation to the thing. Immediately, there is this romantic soul that comes out of us.

OLIVIER ZAHM - Is this romantic soul the aestheticizing of trauma?

BERTRAND BOUTRON - Yes, that fascination with loss, powerlessness, pain made into art. Yes, but it's *bullshit*. This is weepy navel-gazing, wallowing in your misfortune because you don't know how to invent something else. But in music, there is also, for example, most of Bach's work that puts you outside yourself. Like it or not, there is no direct recognition of a human emotion. It puts you on the outside.

OLIVIER ZAHM - So, don't focus on the other, or on yourself. Don't crystallize. Don't become one.

BERTRAND BOUTRON - Be careful, for a start, not to focus on love itself, on this word that eludes our grasp, on those endlessly repeated words, "I love you." We do not know love in itself. It's an analogy, and what does it reflect? It reflects what is elusive. Just like light, you can't grasp it. You know it uniquely by its manifestations. It lights up objects - it enables you to see objects. What does love illuminate? It illuminates a relationship between two people. That is why this relation provokes a feeling of well-being, invention, creativity between two people - anything that is not love. The rest is insecurity. The rest is words.

OLIVIER ZAHM - No focusing on all the symptoms of love, no focusing on the word itself.

BERTRAND BOUTRON - The only real symptom of love - if we want to give a non-pejorative meaning to that word, although I'd rather talk about *manifestations* of love - is a shared feeling of deep well-being, of joy and freedom, of respect for each other's autonomy. The combination of these two autonomies is magnificent. It has nothing to do with trauma. Literature does not talk about love, but about darkness. It talks about love only to describe what is not love.

OLIVIER ZAHM - So, literature, to borrow Maurice Blanchot's expression, is just the writing of disaster.

BERTRAND BOUTRON - Exactly. It's a big disaster. It's misery, and we throw ourselves into it with delight because of the intensity of misery: the intensity of misery and the hope of emerging from misery. It's the intensity of despair. Talking about love here just doesn't make sense.

END



WITHOUT  
ME  
YOU  
WOULD  
BE  
LOST