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SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THE ARTIST AND HIS ART

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Abstract: The article endorses a dissatisfaction with Freud's general accounts of art while maintaining that psychoanalysis does offer a variety of ways of approaching the art work and the artist's own relation to it. It discusses the process of creative work and draws possible links between studio and consulting room, especially as this addresses the person of the artist and the person of the analyst. I use the work of Joyce McDougall as regards the value of the information gained by considering the differences in artists as artists and artists as analysands. While proposing that the art work must be met on its own terms, and developing this through a discussion of the work of Martin Creed, I also see the theories of psychoanalysis and the practice of the consulting room as presenting perspectives that contribute to understanding the meaning of art for both artist and viewer.

In his article, 'Freud's Objects', a discussion of the need for plurality in psychoanalytic cultures, Stefano Bolognini begins from the art that clustered round Freud and, following Gamwell (1996) links his collection to his biography. Freud seems to have started to collect after his father's death in 1896 when he was isolated scientifically and professionally (Gamwell, in Bolognini, 2008). 'He set up for himself "an attentive audience of objects, including an Egyptian scribe, a Greek goddess of wisdom and a Chinese sage... these hundreds of human and animal figures were all turned to face him in the manner of a large audience"' (Bolognini, 2008: 43). In his introduction to *Excavations and their Objects. Freud's Collection of Antiquity* (Barker, 1996) Stephen Barker insists that 'the figures with which Freud surrounded himself in Vienna and then in London have a great deal to say about his sensibility, his subtlety, his links to the past, and his theoretical models' (Barker, 1996: x). As Bolognini emphasises, the consulting room, Freud's most of all, is never a completely neutral space, even for those analysts who attempt to present a complete absence of any personal note. For each of us clinicians our consulting room bears the traces of our lives beyond and in it, a text waiting to be read anew by and with every patient, whether this is ever actually discussed or not.

Freud was clearly devoted to some art, and despite, or indeed because of his own time period, the art he refers to in his written work and cherishes in his surroundings is that of antiquity and its centrality for the Renaissance tradition. But he also seems to have felt rather guilty, or at least uneasy about it, and even in those works where he apparently deals with the art work, for example, the papers on Moses/Michelangelo or on Leonardo, his driving concerns approach the art through the preoccupations of the artist as they may be evinced through a close reading, deriving from his own theoretical interests of their work. Within what could be seen as a reductionist reading that ignores the sculpture or the painting's place as part of a particular tradition and historic context, Freud's own preoccupations nonetheless inspire further thought about what art does for maker and viewer; questions of why, if, how, art matters continually hover around, though they are never directly addressed.

The crowded presences in his consulting room implicitly pose those very questions. Various people recount that Freud regarded these figures as 'companions' and Bolognini, who agrees in seeing them as companions of the consulting room, sums up, 'A constituent world of external/internal objects, therefore, a source at the same time of comfort and inspiration in a potentially creative, illusory middle ground.' (Bolognini, 2008: 43). In this perspective, Bolognini gathers together the inhabitants, actual or imagined, of any consulting room and their function, both for the patient and the analyst as she exists with each patient in the transitional space potentially made available for the joint analytic encounter.

Freud was interested in the figure of the artist and the parallels between drives and wishes and what they signify. Although the excesses of psychobiography and its grip on psychoanalytic approaches to art need to be avoided, the idea that what a person makes is bound up in some way with who he or she is seems less contentious, especially if we look at the art of the modern period and the sheer weight of commentary emanating from critics, and requested or solicited from artists themselves. An interest in the mechanisms of the text and its autonomy does not prevent an interest in the artist and his or her work, and what he /she says about it. But this is a far cry from an approach that examines the text as if it were a patient. In the consulting room the priority is listening, but looking also forms part of the analytic encounter and experience. How a patient arrives in the room, how she acknowledges the analyst, what she looks at, all form part of the analytic session and contribute to the analyst's awareness of the patient. The analyst observes how the patient presents herself, and any changes that may be registered in the usual way of

being are noted, if not necessarily mentioned or interpreted at the time. This forms part of the analyst's everyday attention to her patient.

The work of art demands a more intense and prolonged visual encounter in which looking and processing what is seen are central. In the Freudian account the look is a way of taking in or negating associated with sexuality and the drives. It is inscribed as active.

Winnicott was concerned with a different look, that between mother and baby as fundamental to the baby's encounter, first with the world and then, slowly, in the encounter with the self in the process of its being formed. For him, the self is formed precisely through that exchange of looks between infant and caregiver and what more it carries in terms of establishing the conditions through which the baby's moves from dependence to relative independence are effected in the way most conducive to health. Winnicott saw the foundations of the self in the mother's mirroring role.

Freud did have something to say about looking and about listening, both activities focusing, among other things, on communication with one's self or/and others, and related to the drives. When the British artist Martin Creed is asked about his art and his music, he insists that, for him, looking and listening are always there together, and in his presentation for the Slade event in 2012, he both sang and spoke of his music and his art as aspects of similar concerns. I use this and its links with Winnicott and Freud to make some very general statements about the artist, and the process of making art by linking it with early infantile states and what is established in the first year of life.

I am interested in the links between the artwork, work more generally, and the work of analysis in particular. On this occasion, the focus was the artist, Martin Creed, whose work I approach here through Fiona Bradley's introduction to *Down Over Up* (2009). I then refer to a remark of Sol Lewitt's about Eva Hesse in the catalogue to the Eva Hesse exhibition curated by Briony Fer. I want to put these together with some thoughts about Martin Creed's art and what it offers me. This has been assisted by what the artist himself has said about his work.

In 'Sexuality and the Creative process,' a chapter in her book *The Many Faces of Eros* (McDougall, 1995), Joyce McDougall discusses her experience of treating artists of every sort in analysis. She puts this analytic experience together with her own reading and thinking, especially of Freud, Winnicott and Klein, in outlining four criteria for thinking about creativity and sexuality in characterising an approach to art and psychoanalysis from the viewpoint of being the

analyst of artists. From Freud she takes sexuality and the drives, and, though he wrote very little in detail about them, pregenital impulses; from Klein she takes the idea of violence in infantile fantasy and the importance of violence in all creative production; from Winnicott she takes the idea of play as a serious activity. Although she does not explicitly mention it I think she may also have in mind his ideas about 'Communicating and not Communicating' (Winnicott, 1963). I shall return to this below.

In elaborating the links between sexuality and creativity, she proposes four factors "that form part of the background for any creative thought or act, each intimately linked with the body, [and] its libidinal drives in both their object-related and narcissistic orientations' (McDougall, 1995: 57). The medium of expression and the imagined public address the creator's relation with the external world; the role of pregenital sexual drives in the artist's psychic economy and the integration or non-integration of the bisexual wishes of infancy into the psychic structure concern the internal world of the creative personality. In practice these are hardly separate arenas since they are all aspects of the analytic relationship between McDougall and her artist patients and their joint analytic exploration of that artist's early emotional experience as contributing to the conditions in which art is made, and to that artist's possible motives for making art in a particular way. In McDougall's experience in the consulting room, the repercussions of any or all of these considerations can give rise to emotional experiences of indulging in transgressions which produce psychic conflicts that can impede productivity or make it emotionally costly, or lead to panic, anxiety, depression, psychosomatic manifestations and other forms of decompensation (McDougall, 1995: 58).

McDougall's approach, derived from artists in analysis with her, provides an open one, but one based firmly in a psychoanalytic way of thinking about artists and what assists or hinders their making art. Each arena she identifies offers a range of things to think about, and her focus on the artist as patient may also provide some insight into the place of the spectator, viewer, consumer, enjoyer as well, so that what she has to say becomes more widely applicable. The medium for instance, and what it is, will present itself, on different occasions, as both ally and enemy and there are likely to be (depending on the artist) fantasies of fusion or confusion with it; the imagined public, composed of the significant objects from the past (and/or a new set, like Freud's objects) may be experienced as hostile or supportive ... or both. These are also considerations for the viewer.

The analyst **in the consulting room** approaches her patient's conflicts by thinking, among other things, about what is projected. Is an imagined public welcoming and appreciative, or critical, persecuting, rejecting; is it ignored, allegedly dispensed with, is it instructed and ordered about, etc. What kind of internal object is the imagined external recipient of an artist's productions, and how does this internal configuration enter into the way the art object itself is formed? This mediation of the artist as patient's internal world in the encounter with external realities and their configurations may encourage or hinder the artist as artist in approaching her chosen medium. The medium itself, and prior to that, the choice of a particular medium in which a work is carried out, in itself may emerge from or be shaped by early experience and, through this lens, offer insights into the artist's wishes as shaping the desire to make art, of whatever kind.

To think directly about the internal world is to approach the traces of the valuation of the baby's earliest products and gifts: oral, anal, phallic, but predominantly anal, fecal products, and the mixture of aggression and erotism they condense. This may be perceived ambivalently by their producer as gift and/or weapon; how they are deemed to be received by the person to whom they are given will have further implications for the patient, but also for the artist's affective involvement in her chosen task of making art. The bisexual wishes of infancy involve the identification with both parents, wanting both, and wanting all of their attributes (usually symbolised in this perspective by their bodily organs).

McDougall proposes these four areas as four versions of the primal scene:

> There is probably no creative act that is not unconsciously experienced as an act of violence and transgression: One has dared to play alone, through one's chosen medium of expression, in order to fulfil secret libidinal, sadistic and narcissistic aims; one has dared to display the resulting product to the whole world; in one's production, one has dared to exploit pregenital sexuality, with all the attendant ambivalence; finally, one has dared, in unconscious fantasy to steal the parents' generative organs and powers, and with these, proceed to make one's own creative offspring (McDougall, 1995: 60).

From her work in the consulting room McDougall grounds her account of the creative process and its challenge in an explicitly Freudian approach that emphasises the primacy of the body and its drives and affects as the symbolic foundation of thought and of creativity.

In the introduction to *Down Over Up, Martin Creed*: Fiona Bradley, the director of the Fruitmarket gallery in Edinburgh writes:

> Martin Creed puts ideas out in the world in a variety of materials, not all of them art materials yet not all of them everyday stuff either (while he makes work with readily available simple things such as planks of wood, stacked chairs, or pieces of crumpled paper, he also uses paint, and professionally trained runners and ballet dancers neither of which are so easy to get hold of) (Bradley, 2010: 13).

She goes on to describe a fragment from the song, 'Blow and Suck' (1999) which developed from Work 141 (a work on paper) (1995-99), 'From none take one add one make none,' as 'the type of work which makes itself as you listen to it', but, and this strikes me as rather different, she also sees it as '**instructions** for a work you might make yourself, in your head, though in collaboration with Martin Creed' (Bradley, 2010: 33). The first emphasis, 'the type of work which makes itself as you listen to it', takes us in one direction in this artist's art, towards the establishment of one kind of process – an openness, a generosity towards those who experience it, who are given it, or can take it (it is up to them) to do with what they will. The second thought, 'instructions for a work you might make yourself, in your head, though in collaboration with Martin Creed' takes us in a different direction, one where the viewer is less free, the artist less open, where the artist, however benevolently, instructs, 'This is how to play the game etc... '

Most commentators mention Creed's ordering and reordering, adding and taking away, moving backwards and forwards, and Bradley adds that this making themselves in front of you is rather like letting you in on a process mostly achieved in the studio. But Creed describes himself as not having a studio. Does such apparent out- in- the- openness then lead to an art work in which a different relation with the viewer is invited and established, one where the viewer becomes engaged and drawn into the process of art making in a fundamentally different way from her positioning in relation to art produced in the studio? Such apparent openness may confound the more serious issues of art and its effects and why it matters even as it partakes of

those questions that have become part and parcel of the trajectory of artistic production since the early twentieth century. Rachel Whiteread's statement, " I have never been in therapy. I have my studio".... draws an explicit parallel between the work of the studio and that of therapy: from whose point of view and the internal relations which might be identified in this association could be analytic issues of interest. This is an area for thinking about that seems pertinent for Martin Creed's work and the processes by which it comes to exist, and indeed where they take place, regardless of the physical space of the studio.

The issue of meaning in the work of art has perhaps never been more fluid, some may say irrelevant, but certainly never less concerned to tie a particular image, material object or organisation of objects to a referent, a signified. Nonetheless, the experience, or the idea of the experience, is often posed. Creed's work, or some of it, seems to be presented as a set of oppositions that have to be kept open: a kind of determined insistence on an alleged openness which I would see rather, as a determined non-resolution: not a **or** b, but a **and** b .... Within the space constituted by the art, this, and it is, of course only one aspect of his work, seems intent on maintaining an avoidance of choosing, an illusion of not having to choose, a move towards **both and,** or, **and and, --** never, **either or**. In his attempt to chart two possibilities simultaneously Martin Creed's work wants it both ways, while also seeming to register that, not as a want, or a desire, or a final formulation. Instead it seems to present a space, to throw open a kind of proposition, an arena that is not limited, but one that offers the possibility of not choosing and what that, in turn, evokes for its maker and for those who see it or hear it.

In its bid for no limits, this evokes the characteristics of the Freudian unconscious. 'In the unconscious', says Freud, 'there are only contents cathected with greater or less strength':

> There are in this system no negation, no degrees of certainty... *exemption from mutual contradiction, primary process* (mobility of cathexes), *timelessness*, and *replacement of external by psychical reality* – these are the characteristics which we may expect to find in processes belonging to the system *Ucs* (Freud, 1915 : 187).

In others of the numbered art works the arena is firmly delineated, pegged out by rules, instructions, repetitions, rituals, more or less benign advice: **do this, don't do that**. In these

works a very careful area is in fact delimited but within a space that seems to open up an unlimited arena. Are these ways of expressing and denying what is desired and what is feared?

These aspects in the work – the opening out, or an occasional, slightly didactic instruction manual in some of the pieces that use words – have to be put alongside the sheer variety of his output, and the impression that all are equally attended to – the sculptures, the installations, drawings, paintings, film, video, music and text, ballet – in itself a kind of gesture of expansive inclusiveness, a refusal to choose, to accept limits.

Again, in terms of the process of art making and the process of living it, there is the way bodies are directly involved: the Tate runners, the ballet dancers, the steps, the functions of the body in terms of what comes out – shit, vomit, art. This involvement partakes sometimes of what seems a very literal sense of problem setting, of an artist working away at something, at an agenda that seems nothing if not personal, yet whose issues are always universal. What is art, how can a wall function as a wall, how can stuff come out of a person, how is vomit, shit, art, to be valued in its generality? We might elaborate this to a slightly different register. How can order, the disquiet of civilisation, be imposed on chaos – the human arena of sexuality and affects, of anxieties, fears, excitements, pleasures, of self and other. And what of the limits this necessitates?

In a way these questions take us to the excitements and the worries, the curiosity and wish to know and the prohibitions on that curiosity, which analytically are the terrain of infantile sexual researches. But the terrain of art is another terrain and the particularity of the individual artist central, as is the particularity of the individual spectator.

There are many things to be said about Martin Creed's art and a great many people have said them; the artist, on occasion, has said things as well. Over and above the commentaries there is the work itself, a large, very various corpus. Given psychoanalysis's concern with origins, with families, and familial relationships, there is the place of the Slade in the event at which this paper was given and how its history, personal and institutional, contributes to the artistic processes with which the papers presented have been concerned through the linked exhibition and the continuity it represents, and in the artists present. In a conversation with Briony Fer and Tamar Garb (2011) on the UCL website, Phyllida Barlow talks of her place in the art of the sixties and how art from elsewhere was received, absorbed – or not- in the art colleges, and so on. Here is another kind of process and its internalisation: Creed's roots in the Slade of the late eighties and

early nineties, the inheritance of *arte povera* .. The blue tack, the masking tape, the reused boxes and chairs, or minimalism, and how he found his own way through and beyond is not just a personal history but a particular institutional one, framed by a particular cultural history. His location in a particular moment of art and its trajectory provides some of the questions Martin Creed may have inherited and then set for himself as part of his own concerns in his art.

In drawing attention to the artistic family history embedded in the conference organized by Patricia Townsend, I draw attention to that same ambivalent relation which exists towards parental figures, to authority figures. They form part of the encounters, psychic and actual, of us all – of what we do and how we do it, of how the making and participating in art involves the processes of living, with all the difficulties and pleasures that entails, and with all the work. Part of the process of making art, of whatever kind, is intimately bound up with the personal and local in the sense Joyce McDougall describes – the actual parents and siblings – but the institutional and social families through which art is transmitted and passed on, encountered and argued with, for both artist and those of us who find art important, also play their part.

To respect Creed and to respect his work, his art, in all its variety, is to refuse to go exclusively down the route of a symbolic schema, that same symbolic schema deriving from the body and the internal representation of early bodily experiences being writ large on an artist's work that is demonstrably so important for the artist and the analyst **in the consulting room.** Outside the consulting room, with its concentration on the individual artist, first as patient, and only secondarily as artist, however, such an approach seems to me to lead to a cul de sac: we know little of the artist, we know even less of the work; we avoid the art itself and, in this instance, the kinds of art Martin Creed is engaged in making.

Briony Fer (Fer, 2010) describes Sol Lewitt being asked to sort through Eva Hesse's studio works in 1981. He goes through deciding what is and isn't "work". "Yes, this is a piece"; "No, not a piece"; "I think in the beginning she was just fooling around." For Fer, 'This emphasises the precarious place that these small works have – is it a piece/ isn't it a piece.' She is interested in how the art work itself takes up or addresses these and other issues, specifically the issues that have been the stuff of psychoanalytic enquiry. She mentions loss, but we could add others: memory, desire, reproduction, love, death. How are they proposed by the artwork itself? Fer here approaches the art work as a kind of theoretical proposition where those sorts of questions can be thought: 'There is the materials that they use and that's very important – part of

their visceral effect – that's why they're bodily, why they're precarious.' But their conceptual status is as precarious. What we make of them and how small things like this can have a big visceral effect, to me, says a lot about what art is and what art does to us. Why is it that these small things have that kind of effect? And, on the contrary, how can we think about what the object of art is? In the end, maybe if they (Hesse's studio work) test anything out, they test our capacity to see them as art objects. 'That is a big shift in my own way of thinking, not just about Hesse's work but a range of contemporary artists' work' (Fer, 2010).

What I think is important about this emphasis is that it focuses on some of what the work of art evokes in us, what the artist through his work evokes in us and perhaps in himself – a process of thought, of affective response that, for me, is part of being alive.

Art, says Guy Brett (Brett, 2004), is a way of explaining the world, a form of thinking in materials, along dialectic between their presence and absence. There is a process of thinking in materials, and thinking about the way material is handled. Then there is the effect on us the viewers and how process figures to us. Psychoanalysis may have some relevance for both these emphases.

Winnicott has few words to say about the artist but he does say, 'the question is how to be isolated without being insulated (Winnicott, 1963). What is the answer? Then he adds, 'Shall we stop trying to understand human beings?' This is a bit like Freud throwing up his hands in the face of the creative artist. Luckily Winnicott goes on and doesn't give up! For our purposes here it is this that seems useful:

> In the artist of all kinds I think one can detect an inherent dilemma which belongs to the coexistence of two trends, the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found. This might account for the fact that we cannot conceive of an artist's coming to the end of the task that occupies his whole nature (Winnicott, 1963: 189).

Somewhere the thing that unites Martin Creed, Freud, all of us is this idea of work, the process of working and the idea of life and living. These may be considered really ordinary – what is life about, why do we work etc. – but it is enormously privileged to have as a kind of work the opportunity to think about what art sets up and allows and how each of us or any artist, in this case Martin Creed is involved in this process – for me a privileged way of being alive.

What is specific to Martin Creed is what he chooses to work on and what it allows and enables for us ... Why he does it and what it represents for him is almost another matter entirely.

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