

*BOOK REVIEW*

Gregorio Kohon: Reflections on the Aesthetic Experience – Psychoanalysis and the Uncanny. London and New York: Routledge 2016. 175 pages.*

by Sylvia Zwettler-Otte

Gregorio Kohon's exciting new book should attract serious readers interested in the fascinating relationship between psychoanalysis and art, and indeed it is extraordinary in many respects. Quite deliberately it differs from ambitious books offering comprehensive explanations of art and literature, the creative process, and the aesthetic value or unconscious meaning of art. Kohon instead explores personal emotional reactions provoked by artistic or literary objects and their different meanings, with all their accompanying layers and dynamic shifts. In art the uncanny mixture of past and present, of irrationality and rationality, Kohon argues, stirs in us a feeling of sublime strangeness, fusing the familiar with something 'other'. Hence, he addresses the only issue that every reader undeniably is interested in: the reader's own (potential) experience.

The range of artists he treats is vast: Louise Bourgeois's sculptures, Franz Kafka's 'The Burrow,' a Juan Munoz short story, a Roman baroque church designed by Borromini, Californian sculptor Richard Serra's works, Edvard Munch's paintings, public monuments, installations and more. They all are thematically connected through the experience of the Uncanny, as Freud understood it, as a return of the repressed. This experience always appears strange and familiar at the same time and may not only shock us and make us recoil, but also excite and entice us. If there is indeed a certain openness and intrepidity in the quest to 'understand' a work of art - not only with intellect but with emotional engagement too - the aesthetic experience can resemble that of an ongoing psychoanalysis.

Remarkable too is the deft way the author delves into artists and their creations. He approaches their works as psychoanalytic aids for grasping something beyond formal rationality, and stresses both the peculiarities of art and of psychoanalysis and all that they have in common as well. He carefully accounts for local influences and concludes each interpretative foray humbly with a question mark. The quotations he uses for illustration are all extremely apt. Considering Louise Bourgeois' 'lairs' works, for instance, he notes the need to differentiate their emotional effects. Here we come upon not only pathological retreats, as John Steiner has argued (and likewise encountered in Kafka's 'The Burrow') but also an impressive representation of a borderline personality unable to discern outside from inside. Yet at the same time

* German translation: *Reflexion über die ästhetische Erfahrung – Psychoanalyse und das Unheimlich*. Aus dem Englischen von Susanne Buchner-Sabathy. Wien: Mandelbaum 2018.

Kohon recognizes that there surely are private refuges that protect our psychic health. Anyway, this nuanced approach requires a considerable tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity on the analyst's part because the temporary protection of a burrow, after all, can turn into self-imprisonment. An aesthetic experience, he notes, always includes intimate moments of dynamic creation and is linked with the risk of pain. A key characteristic of modern art is its invitation to expose oneself to a transformative experience. Kohon nicely illustrates the nature of this active engagement via Spanish poet Antonio Machado's words:

*Walker, there is no road,
The road is made by walking (p. 38).*

The private refuge as a prerequisite of creativity is introduced in the book's opening epigraph:

No symphony was ever written by a committee. (Yosef Hayim Yerushami)

The exhibition of Juan Muñoz' creations in London (Tate Modern) confronted viewers with a 'frozen normality' (p. 61) containing a 'lingering sorrow' - as in the installations of a chair standing perilously close to the top of a staircase, or a wax drum punctured by scissors, as if it were a badly damaged eardrum. The artist depicts an anonymous, inaccessible, estranged world wavering between silence and movement, between deception and reality. 'Many Times' is an assembly of 100 identical, smiling human figures without feet and with no hint of mutual contact. They are 'like mirrors that cannot reflect.' Kohon invokes Lacan's considerations (1960) about the mirror stage in the development of the child, who needs the confirmation of the mother for their own recognition in her 'mirror.'

The loss of borders, as threat and theme, emerges in Anish Kapoor whose gigantic blood-red block of wax moves very slowly toward the viewer and retreats again. In London this art exhibition provoked very different associations than it did in Munich, where the host exhibition building originally was a 3rd Reich architectural creation. Both Muñoz and Kapoor nonetheless manage to form inner perceptions of emptiness and discontinuity, for which non-neurotic patients will lack the ability to perceive coherent representations. The original decaethesis of the primary object leaves us with a void, a yearning for an emotional closeness that cannot be reached, because otherwise a deadly fusion threatens.

The dynamic aspect, the movement from richness to void, is an essential trait of the Uncanny. When the familiar transforms itself into something strange, it has an uncanny and destabilizing effect. John Keats called the capacity to bear this, 'negative capability'. It is essential to consider objects from different positions, with a 'peripatetic perception' (p.91), as in Richard Serra's steel sculptures through which one must walk as through a Japanese Zen garden. A synthesis will not always come about. Sometimes it is necessary to accept the gap between irreconcilable aspects – as it is with conflicts.

Movement plays a leading role, when in the creative act the process becomes more important than the result and time, space and movement become a unity again.

Consider Munch's painting 'The Vampire' (1895), famous in part for its very title suggested by his friend Przybyszewski. Kohon illustrates the effect of *Nachträglichkeit*, and demonstrates that the vision of this female vampire's infamous blood-sucking kiss existed long before the painting. The title stemmed from the suggestion of Munch's friend but unconsciously it made sense for him and reflected a memory trace from his childhood. Childhood 'persists', because it 'insists on being part of us' (p. 110).

The penultimate chapter about monuments and counter-monuments is the longest. Starting with Freud's astute observation that governments often wish to appear as guardians of moral standards but disregard them just the same, Kohon recounts Argentine junta era examples of perversion of language by use of words like 'grill' for torture or 'barbecue' for burning of corpses to normalize their crimes. These terrible misdeeds are simultaneously mentioned and concealed so that terror gets mixed in with elements of uncertainty. An endnote informs readers that the author suffered the loss of dear friends and colleagues to the totalitarian junta.

The Warsaw Ghetto Monument commemorates the Jews annihilated there and praises their heroic resistance – a rather narrow interpretation of the monument as a pure symbol of hope. Needs of the present thereby redefine events of the past. The opening of a new Jewish Museum in 2013 beside the monument may add another layer of meaning. In contrast to C.G. Jung's simple regressive phantasies *Nachträglichkeit* connotes a complex process that changes the subject itself, as exemplified in the spontaneous fall to his knees of Chancellor Willy Brandt at the monument in repentance. The author's deep emotions show in a brief passage about his visit to Auschwitz. He evokes religious feelings not in the usual sense but rather as a concern for the suffering of others and a triumph that not all traces of decency were erased. Counter-monuments have no concrete message and yet demand a personal, respectful tribute. The 'Field of Stelae' in Berlin, for instance, represents the Holocaust as a negative space. Kohon develops an understanding of guilt, which, after Freud, we owe to Melanie Klein, as our taking responsibility for the harm we do to others, and which is based on an internalisation of the Law of the father, representing the social order.

The book concludes with a meditation on the broken trail of the aesthetic and on the work of the negative, which seems a homage to André Green, who co-authored works with Kohon. The work of the negative is illustrated by Neustein's drawings, which come into being only by a process of erasure, and by Kurt Schwitters's art, who represented the creation of the paradox and the riddle coming from negativity.¹ Kohon always emphasizes the central role of the negative in psychoanalysis, that is, the Un-

¹ In honor of Schwitter's 50th anniversary of death five volumes of his literary work was published with his motto: 'I am sorry for the nonsense, that it was until now so seldom artistically formed.'

conscious and how it fuses with uncertainty and the omnipresent uncanny. Kohon concludes that the uncanny is fundamental to our experience of aesthetic pleasure. Art, literature and psychoanalysis break all boundaries and yet in so doing manage to keep real chaos at bay.

This fine book examines lucidly and without simplification many fascinating interpretive layers at work in art, and takes as its guideposts not membership in any special psychoanalytic group but rather the need for careful differentiation and the practice of the greatest openness by everyone in the psychoanalytic field. One trusts that it can help to open for many readers illuminating new routes of access to art, literature - and to psychoanalysis.*

*Sylvia Zwettler-Otte is a Training Analyst and a former President of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society 2000-2004. She works in private practice in Vienna and has published and edited a number of books in German and in English including *Freud and The Media: The Reception of Psychoanalysis in Viennese Medical Journals, 1895-1938*; *The Melody of Separation: A Psychoanalytic Study of Separation Anxiety*; *The Sphinx and the Riddles of Passion*, and *Love and Sexuality*.*

* This review first appeared in German in *Psyche: Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse und Ihre Anwendungen* LXXI. Jahrgang Heft 7, Juli 2017