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REVIEW:

‘MAKING SPACE: PSYCHOANALYSIS AND ARTISTIC PROCESS’

SATURDAY 25TH FEBRUARY 2012

UCL, CRUCIFORM LECTURE THEATRE 1, GOWER STREET, LONDON WC1E 6BT

Jonathan Isserow

The ‘Making Space – psychoanalysis and artistic process’ conference provided an opportunity to open up, illuminate and rigorously explore the relationship between unconscious processes and artistic production.¹ Since its inception, psychoanalysis has claimed privileged access to the unconscious and, along with this, has made certain knowledge claims regarding art and creativity. By bringing the field of psychoanalysis together with an exploration of ‘artistic process’ the conference opened up the chance to explore the intersections between the two and investigate the often seemingly mercurial nature of ‘creativity’.

The intention of the conference was to place contemporary artists in conversation with psychoanalysts. By doing so, the event, organised by Patricia Townsend, was no doubt ambitious but also highly valuable in that it provided an opportunity to place both psychoanalysis and art ‘on the couch’, so to speak, further interrogating the dynamic relationship between unconscious process and artistic production. With the event attracting such a large audience, diverse in nature, there is undoubtedly widespread interest in exploring this topic from a range of vantage points. The event did not fail to deliver. It provided a deeply interesting day for artists, analysts and the wider audience. At times it offered a mesmerising spectacle comprised of the slick performance of Grayson Perry, the erudite presentation by Sharon Kivland and the cringe-inducing, yet highly endearing, show by Martin Creed. Alongside this stood the intellectually dense papers of

Kenneth Wright, Valerie Sinason and Lesley Caldwell, which, in their different ways, framed the artistic process in psychoanalytic terms.

As the day progressed it became hard not to shake the growing feeling that the more that was said about the artistic process, the quicker it slipped from one's grasp. What became apparent was that at the heart of conference's aims to know about the artistic process sat a paradox pertinent to both psychoanalysis and creativity: both require the capacity to bear 'not-knowing' for something new to emerge. This is something that the psychoanalyst Patrick Casement has explored extensively in relation to clinical practice (Casement, 1992). He argues that the therapist must tolerate the strain of not-knowing, which 'includes a capacity to tolerate feeling ignorant or incompetent, and a willingness to wait (and to carry on waiting) until something genuinely relevant and meaningful begins to emerge' (Casement, 1992: 9). This prevents the imposition of the analyst's premature understanding, which might arise as a consequence of their own defence against the uncomfortable feelings of the unknown.

I would also like to suggest that there is a parallel between psychoanalysis and the 'artistic process' in this respect, even if they appear to have very different ends. Faced with the prototypically empty space of the paper, canvas or room, the artist must also tolerate the discomfort of not knowing before something genuinely new can emerge. Bion's notion of negative capability (Bion, 1967) imbedded in his aphorism that the analyst should be 'without memory or desire' (Bion, 2004: 16), also connects to this point. The poet John Keats, in a letter to his brother in 1817, was the first to coin this term 'negative capability' (Keats, 1970: 43). Keats champions the notion of tolerating uncertainty and the unknown in order for the as yet unimagined and creative possibilities to emerge, requiring that '... a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason...' (Keats, 1970: 43).

Making space for something new to emerge in both psychoanalysis and artistic practice is predicated on tolerating not-knowing and negative capability. The title of the conference itself indicates the aspiration to reflect and actively create this through its carefully woven structure which made space for 'not-knowing'. Artists and analysts were paired with one another. each presenting briefly for twenty minutes. This set the scene for a longer time and emphasis given to the dialogue between them and thus opening up space for something new to emerge. Townsend's facilitation of the dialogue kept the artistic process on the metaphorical couch rather than the

discussion between artist and analyst falling into the more familiar clinical relationship of analyst and analysand.

Grayson Perry's contribution was interesting in the respect that he was the only artist to locate his creative process within a coherent and deeply personal psychodynamic narrative². Overall, however, it seemed that greater attention was given to the use of psychoanalysis to retrospectively understand the 'artistic process'. In addition, very little time was spent on exploring the creative processes inherent in psychoanalysis, which, it has been argued, is an 'art' in itself (Storr, 1990). Some of the pairings between artist and analyst could also have been different, and, in turn, more potentially productive. Perhaps a better mix might have been Caldwell with Perry, Sinason with Kivland and Wright with Creed, particularly as Wright seemed to become particularly animated in relation to Creed's performance.

Not only Wright, but the audience as a whole were deeply affected by Martin Creed's remarkable and brave performance. Creed, like all good performers, arrived late for his after lunch session (a broken down car delayed him) and embodied the artistic process of 'not-knowing' in the extreme. With guitar in hand he stood on stage waiting for his songs to spontaneously develop *in situ*. When he did sing, the songs revealed his sardonic sense of humour but they were punctuated by long silent gaps while we waited for them to 'emerge'. Waiting and embodying the creative process, he forced the audience into the uncomfortable position of having to wait (and to carry on waiting) with him. As an audience, seeing what was predominantly a private process unfold (or unravel) before us in a public forum was not without its discomfort and embarrassment. However, in doing so Creed playfully yet profoundly returned us all to the tension of the need to not-know in relation to an expectation of knowing – the latter of which was compounded by the conference being held within an educational institution.

Ultimately, the conference has raised more questions than it could realistically answer, making the day highly stimulating yet also frustrating. The value of the conference was in generating discussion around the creative process. Clearly the conference and proceedings in this journal raise important questions, containing deeply investigated ideas that demand further enquiry. What we have become most mindful of is the need to return to making space for tolerating 'not knowing' - inviting in the unknown and unknowable into the endeavour of the theoretical and practical exploration of psychoanalysis and the artistic process.

Notes

¹ Unconscious processes and creativity have long shared an intimate connection, which finds historical precursors in, for example, the explorations of the Prinzhorn Collection (Brand-Claussen et al., 1996) and the work of Surrealists (Breton, 1924).

² Grayson Perry's wife is the psychotherapist, Philippa Perry, and this relationship undoubtedly informs the work they respectively undertake.

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