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A LIFE OF ITS OWN: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ARTIST, IDEA AND ARTWORK

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Abstract: In this paper I draw on interviews with thirty professional artists to explore the states of mind experienced by artists as they make new artworks. An analysis of the interviews suggests that the artistic process may be considered in terms of stages and I have termed these ‘genesis’ (referring to the conception, gestation and birth of an idea for a new work), ‘development’ (referring to the relationship between artist and nascent artwork as the artist engages with her medium) and ‘separation’ (referring to the release of the artwork into the outside world, usually in an exhibition). In viewing the artistic process in this way, I draw a parallel between the relationship between mother (or care-giver) and child and the relationship between artist and artwork. In common parlance, people may speak of their creations, artistic or otherwise, as ‘my baby’ and may experience feelings of loss or relief when these projects are completed, as if the ‘baby’ has grown up and left home. In this paper, I take this idea further to suggest that the psychoanalytic literature pertaining to the mother/child relationship, especially as put forward by psychoanalysts of the British Object Relations school, can shed light on artists’ processes and the states of mind they experience. I draw on the work of D.W. Winnicott, Marion Milner, Christopher Bollas and others to explore the extent to which the mother/child metaphor offers a new way of understanding artists’ experiences.

Donald Winnicott, the psychoanalyst and paediatrician, famously wrote that ‘there is no such thing as a baby ... A baby cannot exist alone but is essentially part of a relationship’ (Winnicott, 1964:88). Perhaps one can equally say ‘There is no such thing as an artist’. Without artworks (or ideas for artworks), there is no artist and the artist is essentially part of a relationship with his or her artworks, at least while they are in the process of being created. From this viewpoint, the trajectory of the artistic process can be regarded as a movement towards separation and differentiation between artist and artwork that culminates in the production of an autonomous artwork that can exist by itself in the outside world.

It will already be clear that I am drawing a parallel between the relationship of artist and artwork and that of mother (or caregiver) and child. This is not a new idea. In common parlance, people may speak of their creations, artistic or otherwise, as ‘my baby’ and may experience feelings of loss or relief when these projects are completed, as if the ‘baby’ has grown up and left home. Here I want to take this idea a little further to suggest that the psychoanalytic literature pertaining to mother/child relations, especially as put forward by psychoanalysts of the British Object Relations school, can shed light on artists’ processes and the states of mind they experience. This does not mean that the relationship between the artist and developing artwork can simply be mapped onto that between mother and child with the artist in the role of mother to the artwork as offspring – the relationship is complex and may at times be the other way round. I am suggesting, however, that the mother/child metaphor opens up a potentially enlightening engagement with psychoanalytic theory.

In the period leading up to the *Making Space* event (the conference upon which this special edition is based),¹ I interviewed thirty professional artists about their experience of creating new artworks². An analysis of the interviews suggests that the artistic process may be considered in terms of three stages and I have termed these ‘genesis’, ‘development’ and ‘separation’. The ‘genesis’ stage includes the conception, gestation and birth of an idea for a new work (or the sense of a direction for those works in which the term idea seems too specific). The ‘development’ stage refers to the phase of the artistic process in which the artist engages with her medium and creates the work; and the ‘separation’ stage refers to the release of the artwork into the outside world, usually in an exhibition. Although these designated stages roughly follow a chronological order, both my analysis of my own artistic process and the findings of the interviews indicate that progression through the stages is not linear. Problems, both conceptual and material, may arise at any point and their solution may call for a movement back to a previous stage, or cyclical movements within a stage, so that progress may follow a spiral route rather than a linear one.

Genesis

I start by questioning whether there is a point at which the process of making a new work can be said to begin. To try to answer this, I turn first to the artists’ own descriptions of the

earliest stages of a new work. Some artists described moments when ideas sprang suddenly and unexpectedly into their minds as ‘a complete epiphany, a sort of frisson’ (Liz Rideal) or ‘a leap of inspiration’ (David Johnson). These descriptions imply a discontinuity between the conscious thoughts that were going on before this moment and the idea itself. The ‘inspired’ idea has not come through logical reasoning but by a ‘leap’ to something new. The artist Simon Faithfull describes the way in which such an idea came to him during a meeting with a curator:

As far as I can tell I came up with that in that moment which really amazes me. It must have been knocking around – I have done other things with balloons – but I’d never actually crystallised it – or it’d never come out of solution, so to speak, until that moment when I absolutely needed to have an idea... Something about what happened revealed to me something about the nature of those ideas – that they’re sort of – yeah – in solution and then at some moment drop out of solution and sort of become crystallised. They feel like there’s something I’ve been chewing on and mulling over but in a very unstructured incoherent way.

In using the metaphor of crystallisation, Faithfull seems to suggest that something was waiting ‘in solution’ in the unconscious until a particular circumstance (in this case the interview) acted as a catalyst for it to assume a particular shape and irrupt into consciousness. But what was that ‘something’? In chemistry, a substance in solution has the same chemical structure as the crystals that are formed. So perhaps one could say that the new idea is already there in the unconscious before it is given conscious shape? Or, pursuing the chemical analogy, is there something that we might compare to a chemical reaction in which different elements combine in the unconscious? Faithfull gives us a clue when he says ‘I’ve done other things with balloons’. So this idea is linked with earlier works although it is different from those works. It seems that combining elements that the artist has been ‘chewing on and mulling over’ in new ways can lead his work in a new direction.

The artist, Leah Lovett, describes the beginning of a new work as follows:

It’s about allowing things to jostle – allowing things that are in your mind to resonate with each other or jostle together and not worrying too much about making them stick but

just kind of holding them together... where you just try to balance things in your mind and sometimes they resist each other and sometimes they seem to kind of come together quite easily.

This seems to suggest that the genesis of a new work involves a coming together of different elements. Sometimes these elements combine easily, at others they 'resist each other', perhaps seeming at first to be incompatible until a new linkage is discovered.

The artist, Russell Mills, uses a different metaphor:

I have a certain set of ideas in my head – passions that I want to explore. So you're constantly looking for things that connect – that have some correspondence to those ideas ... It's what I call shed mentality ... to be so curious about the world that you absorb all these diverse ideas and then somehow make something new out of them. That's what I think creativity is about.

Mills visualises his mind as a working space – a shed – where he collects ideas that seem to him to be relevant to his 'passions'. His use of the word 'passion' suggests that the ideas to be explored have personal significance for him. What is at stake in the creation of an artwork is not only of intellectual interest (though it may also be this) but also touches on the deepest concerns, the passions, of the artist. He also suggests that the direction for the new work comes from a combination of diverse ideas. He 'somehow' makes something new out of them.

Artist 6, a painter, is quite specific about the range of elements that may be brought together in a new work:

The starting point for a painting can come from desire to be with the material in a particular way, either because I'm curious about it or because I want to revisit something or I want to kind of tap into something in myself I haven't got to the bottom of or I'm still busy with, and that I can get through handling the material in a certain way... So it comes from all sorts of different sources. And it can come from a past painting, it can come from another artwork, it can come from a conversation you've had ... again it relates back to your constant response to things in the world that you're tapping into.

Artist 6 speaks of ‘something in myself I haven’t got to the bottom of’, indicating that the new artwork must, amongst other things, provide a form for whatever this ‘something’ is. She expects to realise this form through ‘handling the material in a certain way’. Her sense of what the form will be seems to arise from a combination of different elements: her knowledge of her materials, her sense of the ‘something’ in herself that is not yet resolved, her own past work, and elements from the outside world including, perhaps, a conversation or someone else’s painting. Again, there is a synthesis of different elements leading to a new direction in the work.

But how does this synthesis occur? The artists seem to be describing two rather different processes in the extracts quoted above. Sometimes the preparation for a new work involves a conscious ‘jostling’ of elements that ‘come together easily’ – there is a gradual development of an idea through research or working with a medium. At other times the elements ‘resist each other’ initially before a new work, or series of works, is heralded by the spark of an unexpected idea. In this second scenario, there is usually a time gap between the initial interest in a particular subject and the eventual emergence of the idea for a work. This ranges from a few hours to a period of years:

There is a push and pull, I think, as well where we’ll talk about something and we won’t really get anywhere and then you sleep on it and you suddenly take a step forward and so it sort of comes in cycles. (Thomson and Craighead)

It’s come back. You’d visualised it maybe 10 years ago but it didn’t make sense at the time. I think the idea has been smouldering away. That little drawing... It’s become an idea by bursting into flame... it’s a little flash of inspiration but maybe not inspiration but recognition. (John Aiken)

Thomson and Craighead describe an integral aspect of their process, suggesting that their ideas for each work progress as a series of discrete steps. Aiken’s description seems to be of a more infrequent event, in this case one that has been in gestation for ten years. Aiken suggests that, prior to the flash of insight or inspiration, something has been ‘smouldering away’ at an unconscious level. In this case a visualisation of a possible work has been revived and now can

be seen in a new way. But how can we understand this ‘smouldering’? The word suggests a very active and transformative process. It seems that some work has been going on out of the artist’s awareness linking the previous visualisation to something new, causing it to ‘burst into flame’, a description that captures something of the intensity of the experience. He goes on to say:

You look at it the next day and it’s rubbish... But it’s that excitement generated by something mundane that’s a terrific buzz.

So the moment when an unexpected idea occurs is exciting and exhilarating, a ‘terrific buzz’. There is a sense of ‘recognition’, as if there is a precise fit between the shape of the idea and the inner ‘something’ that the artist wants to put into the work. Temporarily, the new idea is seen as the perfect form.

But how can we understand the unconscious work that leads to the seemingly perfect idea? What happens in the mind during the time gap before a new idea emerges into consciousness? The psychoanalyst, Christopher Bollas, offers a picture of the processes that precede a new idea in his theory of psychic genera (Bollas, 2011). Bollas puts forward the concept of genera as a counterpoint to the Freudian theory of repression in which traumatic experiences are banished to the unconscious, resulting in repetition rather than working through. He suggests that ‘to complement the theory of repression, we need a *theory of reception* which designates some ideas as the received rather than the repressed’ and that the aim of this reception is ‘to allow unconscious development without the intrusive effect of consciousness’ (Bollas, 2011: 62). Perceptions are received into the unconscious for the purpose of incubation or gestation. Bollas suggests that when lived experience evokes intense interest, an inner space is created within which a generative psychic structure begins to form. The initial area of interest constitutes a ‘psychic gravity’ that attracts related elements (feelings, perceptions, fantasies) and, unconsciously, new links are formed. Finally, the new idea emerges into consciousness. Bollas relates this process to intuition. He suggests that the accumulated experiences of the artist as she develops her creative work result in an ‘increasingly specific vision of his object world’ and writes:

What is this ability that derives from the incremental cohesion of a mental structure set up to think an as yet inarticulated idea? Is this not what we mean by a sense of intuition: the sense we have of where to look, what to look at, and how to look at it? (Bollas, 2011: 71)

Bollas sees intuition as an unconscious skill partially derived from the building of psychic genera. According to Bollas' model, psychic genera result in 'crystallized points of attraction' (2011: 72)³ and intuition allows the creative person both to know where to look in the outside world to find those elements that will help to develop his 'idiom' and also to know 'how to receive messages or (significations)' (2011: 72). This formulation gives appropriate weight to the long experience that lies behind the birth of each new artwork. In a sense, the artist has gone through a training in intuition so that her perceptions are increasingly refined and increasingly attuned to responding to elements which will carry her work forward. Bollas stresses the fact that the intuiting person is unaware of what he or she is working on and therefore is protected from the possible judgments of consciousness: '...the intuiting person is unconsciously able to explore lines of investigation that would meet with incredulous disapproval if he were fully conscious of what was being considered' (2011: 73).

Returning to the question of whether a model of human development can usefully be applied to the relationship between artist, idea and artwork, and considering first the stage of 'genesis', Bollas's theory of psychic genera offers a helpful model. I suggest that the generation of the psychic gravity, or genera, can be regarded as the moment of conception. As this process takes place unconsciously, this moment cannot be pinpointed in time (just as the moment of human conception is not consciously experienced as such at the time). The period in which psychic gravity gathers and organises memories, sense impressions and fantasies, forging new links, may then be seen as the period of gestation eventually culminating in the birth of an idea.

Development

Once the idea has emerged, the artist thinks about putting it into practice:

You have these ideas that are perfect in your head and you have to actually make them happen and you then have to deal with the imperfect world – the material realisation of your idea. (Judith Goddard)

Goddard describes the discrepancy between her ‘perfect’ ideas and the difficulty of manifestation. Once she begins to make the idea happen, the rules inherent to the medium come into play. Paint behaves in a certain way, certain manipulations are possible using a computer programme etc. These rules provide boundaries which point up the fact that the artist does not have unlimited control over the art object. Indeed, the development of the final piece will come about through this materiality in a negotiation of ‘conceptualisation, visualisation and materialisation’ (Goddard) – a dialogue between artist and medium. It may be that this recognition of separateness is deferred until the artist begins to work with her medium or she may experiment with an idea in her mind and begin to become aware of potential problems, of the limitations of what is possible. This realisation may lead to a cognitive process in which the original idea is modified and tested in the mind until it seems to be ready to be tried out in practice. Or it may lead to another period of gestation before a new idea emerges.

If it has not already done so, the sense of perfection is likely to dissipate at the point when the artist tries out her idea in practice. The artist must engage in her relationship with her medium – learning from the materials as well as imposing her will on them. This process of negotiation is graphically described by John Aiken:

Although you know what you’re doing, what the result is is something different... After a while you’ve no idea of how you got to where you’ve got to. What you’ve got is something that’s got its own life, its own energy, and therefore you automatically are in a dialogue with it because it’s different. It’s not the sum of its parts. It’s something that is rather strange in some cases and you think what’s this absolutely awful thing I’ve made... But it’s kind of interesting... That dialogue may very quickly turn into divorce but it’s still a dialogue. It’s not a romantic notion of a dialogue. It can be a very focused and a very kind of cold dialogue but you are getting something back because you never can predict what’s going to happen. So each action is taking a risk, is taking a speculative step. If I

knew what it was going to be I wouldn't start it. Because I could just imagine it. So I want to make something where I don't know what it's going to be.

Aiken experiences the 'otherness' of the medium as an opportunity. He does not try to coerce the medium into the form of his idea, but enters into a relationship with it and allows it to take him in unexpected, and at times unwished for, directions. He respects (and values) the particular characteristics of his medium and welcomes its 'participation' in the creative process.

At this point, I want to bring in some descriptions of the states of mind artists experience while they are working with their media:

It was about the drag of the drawing device on the drawing surface. That set up a physical sensation that put me in a certain state. Or if I was wearing a magnifier the sense of my body behind my eyes would dissolve and a sort of ... intimacy would develop. In the studio I have to be in a certain state – what's at stake in this act of drawing becomes terribly important – even dramatic. And there's something about that tension that I really like...it's about being very involved. What's very schematic, very structural in its approach is then set aside as you become involved in that pocket you've created to lose yourself in the activity. (Dryden Goodwin)

You're buried in what you're doing... the concentration, intensity, increases exponentially possibly... It does get like a sort of welding torch – a sort of white heat of something there. You're right in it and you're not thinking about anything else except how this will go, what might happen. (George Meyrick)

That process of disorientation is quite a difficult state to stay in... Not having any markers or anchors or anything that can establish what this thing is that you're supposed to be doing or grappling with. (Hayley Newman)

These artists, in their very different descriptions, are all talking about a deep involvement in the work, a 'concentration' and 'intensity' or 'losing yourself in the activity'. This losing

oneself may be pleasurable but it may also result in a sense of ‘disorientation’ in which the artist feels in danger of losing her way. For the sculptor, George Meyrick, there is the sense of a ‘white heat of something there’ as if the ‘welding torch’ of the artist’s concentration acts on the medium to give form to this ‘something’. Dryden Goodwin eloquently expresses his experience of feeling at one with his developing artwork as he draws on the surface of a photograph. For him, it seems to be his physical interaction with the surface of the work (that is, the boundary between himself and the work) that sets up the sense of intimacy. There seems to be an interplay here between the physical separateness of artist and artwork and the sense of involvement or oneness.

Marion Milner, a psychoanalyst and painter, writes of her sense that at times there is a feeling of fusion between her and her artwork which she links with the concept of illusion (Milner, 1969). Milner defines moments of illusion as ‘moments when the inner and the outer seem to co-incide’ (Milner, 1969: 416) and suggests that, in such moments, something in the external world becomes infused with an aspect of the personal internal world of the subject.⁴ For Milner, illusion or the sense of ‘oneness’ is a ‘bridge leading to objectivity’ (Milner, 1957: 53), a necessary precursor to a sense of ‘twoness’ or separation and it is only through the experience of illusion, understood in this sense, that symbols can be formed.⁵

But the artists did not speak only of this sense of oneness or of ‘losing oneself’. Rather, they described two states of mind running in parallel with one another:

It’s oscillating between being very conscious – because you’ve got to make practical decisions – and being very intuitive and reactive. (Dryden Goodwin)

I would say it’s like heightened reality and being in a trance at one and the same time. So you become totally absorbed in something which could be very mundane and at the same time your thoughts are racing and you’re making lots of decisions and you’re going forward and you’re going back and you’re unpicking it and you’re developing it and you’re imaging something. (John Aiken)

When you’re doing it you’re absolutely making critical judgements but they’re fed... they’re meshed with emotional reaction and engagement... with the kind of pleasure of handling the material. It’s very complex. But I do feel perhaps in terms of this..... sort of

flipping between the alienation and something about connection, disconnection... you as a participant, you as an observer. So there's a kind of a split. (Artist 6)

The state of 'being in a trance' or 'being very intuitive' or 'emotional engagement' seem to correlate with the experience of 'losing oneself' discussed above. Artist 6 describes this in terms of 'connection' in which the artist is 'participant'. The artist 'oscillates' between this lack of differentiation and a more separate state of 'being very conscious' or 'heightened reality' or 'disconnection' in which the artist takes on the role of 'observer' and 'thoughts are racing and you're making lots of decisions'. This brings to mind the educationalist Anton Ehrenzweig's description of a particular state of mind which he sees as integral to the process of art making (Ehrenzweig, 1967). This state involves a 'flexible scattering of attention' and an 'unconscious scanning' which he describes as 'dedifferentiation'. In this unfocused state the artist is able to hold all the diverse elements of the work in mind at once. According to Ehrenzweig, in the artistic process there is a 'smooth oscillation between focused and unfocused modes of perception' (Ehrenzweig, 1967: 28) as the artist moves in and out of the dedifferentiated state. There is a movement between a sense of oneness (artist as participant) and separation (artist as observer).

This experience of oneness or 'participation' is felt to hold certain dangers:

I mean when you find yourself is it because you've really lost yourself? And is it also a matter of filling yourself up with yourself – feeling filled with oneself? And there's something about being absolutely overwhelmed by something and being overwhelmed by the feeling you're going to just disappear altogether. But it's so exciting thinking up to the point where you can, you can still be there but to the point of obliteration in a way... this relationship of the nothing to something and, and then being overcome by something or so absorbed by something that you can't get back to yourself is kind of a terrifying thing. (Artist 6)

I think I work quite intensely and I don't necessarily stop at night or the morning. It doesn't really stop it just goes on and I do get into quite an intense state, I think, where the brain sort of slips into something else. But it does make me work. But I think if I went

on like that without seeing... other people then I think I would be completely insane and then the work wouldn't work because I would have tipped over the edge. (Artist 13)

These artists suggest that this level of absorption in the relationship with their developing artwork is both seductive and dangerous. For Artist 6, there is the promise of 'feeling filled with' herself and of 'finding' herself if she surrenders to the process. The notion of 'finding' suggests that something has been lost or that she is temporarily blind to some aspect of herself. This loss stirs up a sense of urgency and a desire to find the part of herself that is felt to be alienated or missing. But it also involves the potential loss of self – the inability to 'get back to yourself'. Artist 13 emphasises the sense of a lack of boundaries – 'it doesn't really stop, it just goes on' as if she is absorbed in an infinite space. She needs to see other people in order to regain her contact with the outside world. In this state, the artist seems to be in danger of losing touch with the 'observer artist' part of herself, or her observing ego. For Artist 6, this results in a fear of 'being absolutely overwhelmed' by the feeling that she might 'disappear altogether'. The artist's identity might be lost in the engulfing relationship between her and her developing artwork.

Through her examination of her own process, Milner also becomes aware that the state of illusion carries certain anxieties: '...even if it were true that one did need, at times, not to have to decide which was the other and which was oneself, such a state obviously had its dangers. It might become so alluring that one did not wish to return to the real world of being separate' (Milner, 1957: 31). She too describes a fear of becoming lost in the illusory state, of being unable to regain her sense of separate identity. Like Milner, Ehrenzweig also suggests that this state of mind carries its own dangers: 'The necessary blurring of conscious focusing is felt as a danger and a threat of total chaos' (Ehrenzweig, 1967: 46).

Artist 13's description indicates the importance to artists of setting up certain boundaries for their practice in order to combat these dangers. She did this for herself by ensuring that, at appropriate intervals, she had contact with other people. For many artists, the studio and the rituals of starting work mark off their working space and time, separating it from the demands of everyday life:

I have a set of things that I have to do before I start work if I'm in a studio. When I had my studio in Newcastle, whenever I went in there I would sweep it. I would start every day

and I would sweep it even though it didn't need sweeping. But I would do that and that would take about 20 minutes. That would be a way of cleansing my head and clearing away any extraneous stuff though it was quite unconscious – I didn't know that was what I was doing but I would do it religiously every day and then I would start my work. (Sian Bonnell)

However, not all artists work in studios and the creation of a contained working space does not necessarily require a particular physical environment. Some artists are able to move into a different psychic space in a variety of situations:

The spaces are important. I obviously need space to work in and I need that psychological space to be free to explore and make mistakes – to allow failure. (Russell Mills)

It was a psychological kind of space that wasn't near my laundry basket or the washing up. (Leah Lovett)

I need to create boundaries – they are kind of boundaries, routines, aren't they? ... I think they calm me down to be honest. I get a bit overwhelmed. (Jo Volley)

The artist needs an internal mental space that is separate from the world of everyday life (the laundry basket or washing up) and this is prepared for and protected from intrusion. Rituals and routines allow the artist to enter a 'psychological space' where she can be 'free to explore and make mistakes'.

The psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott, writing about the relationship between mother and infant, suggests that the mother holds and contains her infant both physically and mentally and this 'facilitating environment' (Winnicott, 1965) offers her child a protected space in which to develop. According to Winnicott, the mother has two roles in relation to her child – a role as an object to which the child can relate and a role as provider of an environment that will foster development:

...it seems possible to use these words 'object mother' and 'environment mother' in this context to describe the vast difference that there is for the infant between two aspects of infant-care, the mother as object, or owner of the part-object that may satisfy the infant's urgent needs, and the mother as the person who wards off the unpredictable and who actively provides care in handling and in general management. (Winnicott, 1965: 7)

Just as the relationship between mother and baby needs a facilitating environment to foster development, so too does the relationship between artist and artwork. The artist herself must provide this by setting up a space protected from impingements that might disturb the process and by making decisions about what is best for the development of the artwork. In this respect, the artist acts as 'environment mother' in relation to the developing artwork and her own relationship to it. At the same time she is deeply involved in the 'white heat' of her one-to-one emotional and physical engagement with the work and this involvement can be compared to the involvement of the 'object mother' with her infant. According to this reading, the artist continues to be in the role of mother to the developing artwork as she was in the genesis stage. But this tells only part of the story. In addition to her own mothering role, now the artist may also assign the role of mother to the artwork. The psychoanalyst, Kenneth Wright, draws a parallel between the relationship of mother and child and the artist's relationship with her artwork, or rather the medium in which she works (Wright, 2009b) but, in Wright's formulation, the mother/infant roles are reversed and the medium is used by the artist to perform some of the roles of the mirroring or adaptive mother. Winnicott writes that, in the course of healthy development, the mother mirrors the infant in the sense that her loving gaze allows the baby to see himself reflected in his mother's face: 'The mother is looking at the baby and *what she looks like is related to what she sees there*' (Winnicott, 1971: 131). Wright draws on Winnicott's concept of mirroring together with Daniel Stern's work on attunement (Stern, 1985) to suggest that the artist is engaged in a struggle with her medium in which she attempts to mould it into a form which is attuned to her inner state, a form which can act as a mirror for her. In this formulation, Wright identifies a parallel between the infant/mother relationship and the relationship between artist and medium, but the artist does not merely project states of mind into her medium. She is, then, active in transforming the medium in order to coerce it into a mirroring role. Taking Wright's

formulation a little further, I question the mechanism by which the medium performs this role. Mirroring is a psychic function (though expressed visually through the mother's face). I suggest that the medium takes on this role through the agency of the artist in that the artist projects her own maternal function into the developing artwork. It is the artist herself who must tolerate, transform and mirror her own internal state, using her medium to embody this reflection.

As is clear from the artists' quotations above, this 'moulding' of the medium is not a one-way activity in which the artist uses a passive material. Rather, there is a 'dialogue' between artist and medium in which the attributes of the medium affect its response to the actions of the artist. The mirroring role of the medium is not entirely analogous to the mirroring of the infant by the mother. The mother mirrors the infant's emotional state and the artist's medium is required to do this but it must also reflect those intellectual concerns that she wishes to explore in the work. And beyond this, of course, it must be moulded into a satisfactory artistic form.

Separation

The final phase in the artistic process is the presentation of the artwork to the outside world, usually in an exhibition. The period leading up to an exhibition involves a change of focus for the artist. The relationship is no longer exclusively between artist and artwork. A third has arrived in the form of the potential audience. As Ehrenzweig writes, in the third and final stage of the artistic process the work 'assumes independent existence and "otherness"' (Ehrenzweig, 1967: 119)). Simon Faithfull speaks of a meeting with a curator and a discussion about the future of 'the work' as if it no longer had anything to do with him. This felt 'weird' and it took him a moment to accept that this was the appropriate time to let go and allow the work to have a life of its own (Simon Faithfull, 2013, personal communication).

Artists express very different reactions to this stage of letting go:

It's reached some point of autonomy. It can fend for itself. It doesn't need me to do anything any more. (John Aiken)

It's like an umbilical cord. They are my children you know and I have to cut it. I have to cut and you've got to get yourself to a point where you can do that. You know you've got

to do it ... It's part of me till then and then it's not part of me but there is still a raw thing.
(Sian Bonnell)

I think I have a relationship with things when they're finished. I definitely have a relationship with them afterwards... It then has a different life. It might have a life being up in an exhibition and people talking about it... an independent thing. (Kay Tabernacle)

For Aiken, there is a pleasure in the recognition that the artwork no longer needs him to do anything. His responsibility towards it is finished. There is an implicit use of the parent/child metaphor here but the parallel is with a grown up child who can now fend for himself. Bonnell, however, uses the metaphor of the newborn baby, still connected through the umbilical cord. She emphasises the painful aspect of separation and the sense of loss when an artwork is finished. Tabernacle, on the other hand, only sees herself as having a relationship with the artwork once it is finished. Then she feels she can relate to it as something in the outside world, separate from herself.

This experience of letting go varies according to the artist's medium. For the performance artist who performs his or her own work, there is no letting go in this sense as the artist remains personally and physically involved in the exhibition. Here, separation would result in the end of the work in its original form (though it might live on in the form of its documentation). Artists who use mechanical or electronic equipment may feel that they need to keep a watchful eye on the conditions of exhibition. For the artist who uses other performers, there may be anxieties about whether all is going according to plan. Martin Creed speaks of the difficulties of letting go of a performance piece at the point of exhibition. His *Work No. 850* at Tate Britain involved runners in the Duveen Gallery (Creed, 2008): 'Then there's the question of whether or not it's been done properly which is a nightmare to me if you're... you know, always having to phone the gallery to make sure it's going on ...' (Creed, 2012). This highlights the differences between the experience of exhibiting paintings, photographs or sculptures that do not change in the showing and exhibiting pieces that continue to demand the artist's attention. In this sense, these latter artworks might be compared to children who have left home but who still need support⁶.

Ehrenzweig (Ehrenzweig, 1967), basing his ideas on Kleinian theory, offers an account of the unconscious processes that may accompany this stage of the creative process. According

to Ehrenzweig's three stage model of the artist's process, in the first phase, the artist projects fragmented parts of the self into the developing artwork. Following the second phase of integration, the final phase involves the re-introjection of these fragments, now 'at a higher mental level' as a result of their integration in the artwork. Ehrenzweig suggests that, in order to move through the third stage of creativity and therefore to achieve a separation from the artwork, the artist must take back the mental contents that were projected into it in the first stage. This is a helpful model in thinking about the separation stage but I think that Bollas's theory of perceptive identification can add a further dimension. Bollas has coined the term 'perceptive identification' (Bollas, 2006) for a period in the child's life when he or she appreciates 'the integrity' of the object, appreciating it for its own qualities different from those of the self. He contrasts this with projective identification in which aspects of the self are projected into the object. Bollas suggests that both processes can go hand-in-hand:

If projective identification gets inside the other, perceptive identification stands outside to perceive the other. The term identification means quite different things for each concept. In projective identification it means identifying with the object, in perceptive identification it means perceiving the identity of the object. Both forms of knowing need to work in tandem with one another in a creative oscillation between appreciating the integrity of the object and perceiving its identity, and then projecting parts of the self into the object, a form of imagination (Bollas, 2006: 68).

Bollas' suggestion that projective identification is a form of imagination is interesting as it seems to link with the artist's activity. Integrating this idea into Ehrenzweig's model, in the first stage of the creative process the artist imaginatively locates parts of herself in her developing artwork through projective identification. During the artistic process, there is a gradual progression from the predominance of projective identification towards perceptive identification as the work approaches its final form. The original projections are transformed through the use of the medium so that, in the 'separation' stage, the artist retrieves these parts of herself (now transformed) and can now 'appreciate the integrity' of the artwork and 'perceive its identity'. This allows the artist to learn from her own artwork. Grayson Perry says that, having made the difficult separation from his artwork: 'then the interesting bit is when you see it again,

sometimes after ten years or something, and there you have a little bit of yourself reflected back to you' (Perry, 2012). This suggests that the separation from the artwork, and the accompanying withdrawal of projections, does not necessarily occur fully at the time of exhibition. It might, indeed, be delayed for some years:

And then that articulation happens over many many years. So a piece of work I made 10 years ago, I am still articulating it. I'm still talking about it and still reframing it in terms of current work that I'm doing. It just keeps on keeps on going and has many layers to it.
(Hayley Newman)

The first version I made of this one didn't have that spark of life – that bit of magic – it didn't make it come alive. It didn't make it vital. (George Meyrick)

Unlike Perry, who describes returning to a single artwork after a period of time, Newman describes a process in which she continues to explore a particular concern over a long series of works. Each new work takes her a little further towards articulation. So each may be successful in its own right in embodying some aspects of that inner 'something' that she wants to approach. Meyrick, on the other hand, makes a new version in order to capture a 'spark of life' that eluded him at the first attempt. But both artists can be understood to be continuing to pursue that 'inner something' that calls for articulation or, to use Bollas's language 'the unconscious desire for "its" evolution' (Bollas, 2011: 70).

Conclusion

My starting point for this paper has been artists' own perspectives on the process of making art. From their accounts of their practices and states of mind emerges a model of process involving a series of stages, which I have called genesis, development and separation. In the 'genesis' stage, the artist takes on a maternal role in relation to the idea (or new direction) in which the generation of a 'psychic gravity' can be seen as the moment of conception. This is followed by a period of gestation during which self-states, memories and sense impressions are

linked. This takes place inside the artist's mind, out of her awareness, paralleling the gestation of a baby inside the mother's body. Eventually, this internal process leads to the birth of a new idea.

During the stage of the artist's process which I have designated 'development', the artist can be understood to adopt both the role of mother and that of child in relation to the nascent artwork. In the role of 'environment mother', she nurtures the work, providing a facilitating environment within which it can develop. She also enters into an intense relationship with it in which she takes on the role of 'object mother'. At the same time, she moulds it into a form that will mirror her internal state and her concerns, endowing it with maternal qualities so that she may also adopt the role of infant in relation to the medium. This mix-up of different roles comes about through a movement between states of oneness, in which the boundaries between artwork and artist are temporarily dissolved, and states of relative separation in which the artist is able to stand outside the artwork, evaluating it and appreciating its qualities.

Finally, in the 'separation' stage the artist takes back those aspects of herself she projected into the developing artwork and she is now able to perceive the work as a separate and autonomous entity capable of leading its own 'life' in the world. The emotions that may accompany this stage – relief, pride, anxiety or loss – parallel those experienced by parents as their children leave the nest of home life.

Afterword

This paper is, in a sense, the result of a double translation. The artists I interviewed attempted (often very eloquently) to find words for experiences that are essentially non-verbal and, in trying to relate their descriptions to ideas from psychoanalysis, I have attempted a different sort of translation. In this two-stage process there is a danger that the essential quality of the original experience might get lost along the way. In an attempt to stay with the artists' experiences as closely as possible I have sought feedback on the final text and some of the artists interviewed have entered into further dialogues with me to correct or clarify my understanding of their descriptions.

Artists are highly individualistic and each has his or her own style, personal and professional history, chosen media and areas of interest. The interviews revealed not only commonalities but also many individual differences between artists' experiences of their own

process. No single model will do justice to the complexity and variety of artists' experiences and the metaphor I propose in this paper – the mother/infant relationship – will inevitably be incomplete and may sometimes be inappropriate. I put it forward not as a 'one size fits all' explanation but, rather, as a starting point for further exploration.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my gratitude to all the artists I interviewed for their fascinating accounts of their experiences whilst creating new artworks.

Notes

¹ The conference took the form of a day of dialogues between artists and psychoanalysts on the subject of artistic process. It is described in detail in the editorial of this issue.

² Where the artists have agreed to this, I refer to them in the text by name. Others prefer to remain anonymous.

³ Bollas uses the metaphor of crystallisation here but his 'crystallized points of attraction' are in the receptive unconscious whilst Faithfull's use of the metaphor refers to a newly conscious idea.

⁴ This is closely related to D.W. Winnicott's concept of potential or transitional space (1953) as an overlap between the world of shared external reality and the personal inner world.

⁵ She discusses the formation of symbols in her clinical paper 'The Role of Illusion in Symbol Formation' (Milner, 1952).

⁶ Margaret Mahler, a psychoanalyst working in the USA, developed the separation-individuation theory of child development, according to which the infant gradually develops a sense of his own identity, separate from his mother (Mahler, Pine and Bergman, 1975). Peter Blos posited a second separation-individuation phase in adolescence when the young person moves from the nest of home life into the outside world (Blos, 1967).

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