

ART AND MADNESS-DISCUSSION

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It is with delight and also trepidation that I embark on this discussion about the Prinzhorn collection. As you have seen, the documentary is a complex assortment of historical data, a biographical account of Hans Prinzhorn's life, footage on a couple of artists talking about their work, footage on the advent of Nazis and the infamous 1937 Degenerate Art Exhibit in Munich when art from the Prinzhorn collection was appropriated and shown side by side with the work of artists at the time. There is also some footage on Grafeneck, one of the four extermination camps where many of these schizophrenic artists died. The documentary leads to important questions about the nature of individual self-expression, the boundaries between artistic creativity and mental disturbance, the relationship between art and psychosis and the nature of creativity itself, questions that have continued to concern art historians since the collection was uncovered in 1963.

In his book Prinzhorn attempted to develop an aesthetic theory that claimed that his schizophrenic artists possessed an "essential insight" and led to an art based on the artists' deepest emotions. In 1936 Earnest Kriss criticized Prinzhorn's aesthetic theory in "Explorations in Art." In Kriss' view these forms were not primal manifestations of universal formative forces but a psycho-dynamically organized attempt at self-rescue on the part of the floundering ego. The question can be restated, is schizophrenic art an expression of the patient's impulse to create or is it an attempt to reconstruct an ego that is in shambles because of the psychosis? Grebbling's amazing calendars in the film are an example of the latter - he is desperately trying to bring order into his chaotic world and he does this for more than four decades.

If we agree with Kriss that the psychotic's creativity is an attempt at self rescue, does this mean that psychotic art is a valid art form? *I propose that even if a painting's aim is a reconstruction of the self, psychotic art has the same validity as non-psychotic, sane art. In all forms of artistic creation the person, artist or not, manifests externally what is going on in his or her internal world.* There might be cases where the aim can be both an expression of the internal world and a

reconstruction of a psychotic process. I reiterate then that, however it comes about, we can consider psychotic art a valid art form.

As far as the boundaries between artistic creativity and mental disturbance I would like to take this opportunity to debunk certain mystiques about psychotic art. There is an aura of demonic possession about it, a superstitious feeling. As we all know, the fear of psychosis reveals the fear of our own unconscious. We all have secret places that break open when and if we become psychotic. If one loses the boundary between dream and reality one innocently paints the dream that seems to be reality. The content of this art is often conventional and the subject matter banal but the ideas about its aim can be unrealistic, like saving the world or being the bridge between France and Germany. There is the fear of crossing the boundary and of losing contact with reality. Because of this fear the average person is afraid to give in to fantasy. Sane artists take that risk but still hold onto reality although we are all familiar with artists like van Gogh, the proverbial mad artist, who lived and painted through psychotic states. The sane artist has access to his dream and when he paints he knows it is his dream. However, the permeability and flexibility of artists' mental structure puts them at risk of a psychotic collapse or the ongoing experience of psychotic states. Many well-known artists in the past and in the present have had long periods of inactivity when under a psychotic depression.

As far as the relationship between art and psychosis people tend to believe the art produced by these patients might be the result of demonic possession rather than divine inspiration. Psychotic art is the result of a dream that spills into reality. August Naterer, the patient who believed to be a descendent of Napoleon the IV, wanted to bridge a gap between Germany and France and he was so compelling that it took a while for people to realize that his letters were representing his dream world and not reality. He worked for twenty six years on an imaginary family tree supporting his fantasy. Viera Schmidt, the patient who had been subjected to electro shock therapy, was saving the world with her drawings. She believed that her simple lines had a beneficial influence in the world. I will talk later about the circumstances that stimulate this fear of psychosis.

We turn now to the question about the nature of creativity itself. Influenced by Freud, surrealists became interested in primitive art childrens' art, art of the insane and outsider art, art produced by people without any formal training or connections to the art world, also considered anti-cultural art. They developed a strong interest in

getting in touch with their unconscious and tried to get to it by painting with the eyes closed and by automatic writing, all this explicated in André Breton's Surrealist Manifesto published in 1924. In it Breton states that whether faced with the products of hypnotic trance, or those of psychotic delirium, those of an analysand engaging in free association, or those of the surrealist automatist, their common source is the unconscious. Breton thought that their results were an amazing proof of the fluency of what Freud called "primary process". The formula of pure psychic automatism was officially unveiled in the manifesto as the cornerstone of the surrealist theory of creativity.

The expressionist movement developed in different countries around 1905, and was also influenced by outsider art. Expressionist art was characterized by heightened symbolic colors and exaggerated imagery. The German expressionists tended to dwell in the darker, sinister aspect of the human psyche. Examples are Max Beckmann and Otto Dix. Rouault represented an isolated expressionist in Paris. Egon Schielle and Oscar Kokoshka created their work in Austria.

Hans Prinzhorn's book "The Artistry of the Mentally Ill", published in 1922 had an enormous impact on the surrealist and expressionist movements and even the abstract expressionist movement in the US. Artist Jean Dubuffet started in 1945 an amazing collection of what he called Art Brut, raw art, and a form of outsider art that influenced not only the surrealist movement but also the expressionists. In his collection, based in Lausanne, Switzerland, he found a source of inspiration for his own work. For him, these works have an authenticity and originality, a passion, even a frenzy that is lacking in the works of professional artists. He sought this divine madness in his own work and experimented constantly with various techniques. Pursuing the widespread interest in primitive art Paul Klee had began collecting children's drawings and outsider art. He produced the largest body of analytical work, over 4,000 pages of notes of his observations preserved in the archives of the Klee Foundation in Bern, Switzerland, which has had a tremendous influence on aspiring artists of every school. He believed in a hidden source of creative power, the main thesis of this discussion, and had a unique capacity to set other artists free to make their own way. Klee's interest in outsider art can be traced back to his remarkable statement in 1912 in a review on the Blue Rider that we ought to take the art of children and the mad seriously.

Working on this discussion has helped me formulate again some of the principles of the work I have been doing in my studio in the last two

years. I had resisted teaching art for years until I came upon this notion of helping people in a different way from traditional art therapy. People – I consider them outsiders - come to paint in my Venice studio once a week in order to regain the freedom to create that they may have had as children. I call it “the art experience group” and make the point that they are not doing this as art instruction or with the aim of becoming practicing artists but as a way to expand the limits of their freedom to do and to be. What I do is not art therapy because I don’t interpret the content of members’ creations. However, I can’t deny that what we do is therapeutic insofar as any expansion in freedom is therapeutic.

In my dealings with the participants I use what I have learned about the creative process during my years of painting and what I have been able to observe in painters while they work. When I began to paint almost 40 years ago I became fascinated watching artists struggle with their work and wondered what were the factors that helped or hindered the work’s development. I became very interested in my own process and, like Klee and Dubuffet before me, I documented my work in progress in various papers accompanied with slides. In one of these papers, “The Evolution of a Painting”, I traced with 18 slides the development of its progress during the four months it took to complete it. I also discussed several dreams I had during this period that related to the work in progress. Years later I did a retrospective paper on the occasion of the first IPA Congress in Santiago, Chile in 1999 to celebrate the 30th anniversary of my leaving Chile, where I was born, and 30 years of painting. This paper had 112 slides and I entitled it “Destruction and Reparation in the Creative Process: a Retrospective.” I am telling you all this to let you know how my background and experience is informing my ideas about psychotic art.

The artist has an acute awareness of his internal realities, the inner reality he seeks to express, and his external reality but he needs to differentiate what is internal and what is external. A basic difference between creativity and delusional creativity is that at times the insane artist fails in this recognition. We have seen that in Viera Schmidt, for example, the artist who could change the temperature with her colors or have an impact in the world with her lines.

According to Hanna Segal who has applied Melanie Klein’s notions to the understanding of creativity, in the impulse to create we confirm that there can’t be art without aggression. Even the first step in starting artistic work contains tension and aggression. The first line drawn on the canvas or on the paper indicates that something hurtful

has been inflicted and it has to be made good. The artist works through the infantile depressive position – called depressive because of the sadness at the recognition of the damage inflicted on loved ones. In Kleinian theory this means that in his unconscious fantasy he is attacking the internal parents and their babies, recognizes this and repairs the damage; true reparation must include an acknowledgement of aggression and its effect. The artist needs to create something in his inner world corresponding to the recreation of his internal objects and world. The truth the artist is after is primarily psychic truth, a truth he ends up manifesting in the external world. This implies a resolution of the infantile depressive conflict, which suggests that the reparative attempt at this resolution has been successful. Achieving something in the external world is essential to his feeling of completed reparation and marks his return to external reality.

In any work of art destroying and recreating occur constantly. The resolution is completed internally but the artist's reparative work is never completed. The artist seeks to locate his conflict and resolve it in his creation. It is a paradox that the artist's work is new and yet arises from an urge to recreate or restore. The work of art is then felt as having a life of its own that will survive the artist.

What grips us when facing art is the artist's intentions and this is not a matter of intellectual comprehension. Freud was baffled by two problems: the nature of the creative impulse and that of the means by which the artist captures and engages his audience. According to Freud (1914), the artist aims to awaken in us the same emotional attitude, the same mental constellation that produces in him the impetus to create. This is perhaps Freud's most original and profound statement regarding creativity. Much has been written since about the "significant form," the end result of the impulse to create.

I can now report to you what I have learned about creativity and its inhibitions, phenomena I see so clearly in my studio. When it comes to painting, one of the factors inhibiting creativity is a premature concern with harmony and balance, notions that are so stressed in art schools. I believe such a concern should come at the end of a long time of experimentation and of tolerating the unknown, which I see as the major factor in helping the work move forward (Safán-Gerard, 2002). This surely also applies to writing. In preparing for this discussion I have had to go through a period of not knowing for quite a while, tolerating the anxiety of not knowing if I could pull some ideas together. Now I have the anxiety of whether I will remember them!

This necessity to stay in this not knowing place while creating is what attracted me to attend an art class many years ago: it was refreshing to attest that nobody knew what they were doing and they were not afraid to admit it. This was in stark contrast to the omniscient attitude of psychology students at UCLA where I was doing my clinical training. I don't believe the artists in the Prinzhorn collection cared much about knowing what they were doing - they simply followed their impulses. As we have implied before, the difficulties with tolerating the unknown have to do with a fear of a loss of boundary between one's conscious mind and one's unconscious. The grip on reality can be lost and it can actually be terrifying, a terror that underlies people's complaints about experiencing creative blocks. Many artists stop the work at this point and sometime for long periods of time. I have seen this happen to those painting in my studio and have found that this reaction comes about when the artist is observing the whole painting in progress and wants to find balance and harmony in it. At this juncture I suggest to them to focus on a very small area that they like and work only around that area for a while. I hadn't realized until I read for this presentation that Paul Klee had also advised artists to be very modest and focus their attention in the smallest possible area. He must have realized how focusing on the whole painting can be detrimental to the progress of the work. Perhaps focusing on the whole unfinished painting stirs up psychotic anxieties that can't be managed. The chaos in the painting becomes the mirror image of one's internal chaos.

We can go back to the film now. One's imagination allows vast problems to be solved very simply, especially by children. Viera Schmidt in the film is drawing with yellow and green saying these colors represent heat and cold. Pointing to the yellow she says, "The cold went away thanks to my painting." This brought to mind something that happened with my daughter years ago. My daughter and I were sitting in the waiting room of a doctor's office and I gave her paper and pencil to draw while we waited. She was only 3 or 4 years old and drew a typical figure of a circle with sticks/legs and next to it a square with four circles underneath. She said it was a little girl and a car. I said, "Poor little girl. She may get run over by the car." She listened and while drawing a straight line from the girl to the edge of the paper she commanded, "Little girl, move!" and looking at me she told me, relieved, "She moved". All she needed was a straight line to solve the problem. But the opposite, however difficult it is at times to create, can be true as well. Artist Alberto Giacometti asked his writer friend James Lord to pose for him for a portrait. This was no minor task because Lord would have to sit for him several separate times. Lord agreed on the condition that Giacometti would allow him to

carry out a written portrait of Giacometti at work. This resulted in a marvelous little book with 16 photographs of the work in progress and Lord's description of Giacometti at work. It turned out that Giacometti complained constantly that he should have never become a painter, that the work was going badly, that he never learned to draw properly and so on. After a couple of hours Lord asked Giacometti if they could stop for lunch. Giacometti replied, "No, we can't leave now because the work is going badly." He continued to complain for the next couple of hours. Lord was by then very hungry and suggested that they should stop for lunch. Giacometti replied, "No, we can't! It's going better now and we can't leave it." We can see here how both the fear of not being able to paint and the fragility of painting well can lead to the same compulsion to stay connected to the work even while ignoring physical needs.

Ever since the surrealists and expressionists discovered Art Brut and Prinzhorn published his book on the 12 masters there has been a definite movement toward including outsiders in the art world, as we know it. Prinzhorn's book brought about a shift in values. The artists' essential insights of the deepest strata of the mind placed their work on equal footing with "professional art." As you saw in the movie, the first exhibit of their work was as part of the "Degenerate Art" exhibit in Munich in 1937. The Nazi propaganda machine appropriated some of the work from Prinzhorn's collection and exhibited it alongside art of contemporary artists to discredit and reject modern art, making the point that all modern art was insane and that the Jewish art dealers who were promoting this art were also insane. Inventory lists indicate that at least 16,500 works were seized from Germany's galleries and 32 museums. The show was intended as an official condemnation of modern art. It ended up being comprised of over 650 works by 112 artists, many of them Jewish or married to Jews. Expressionism and the Bauhaus were heavily represented. Among the artists were George Grosz, Emil Nolde, Amadeo Modigliani, Salvador Dali, Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Fernand Leger, Max Beckmann, Wassily Kandinski, Marc Chagall, Piet Mondrian, Oscar Kokoschka, Max Ernst, Joseph Albers, Kurt Schwitters, Otto Dix and others. After Munich, the touring exhibition covered 11 other cities in Germany and Austria attracting three million visitors by the time the tour ended in 1941. As a counter to all this Nazi propaganda, in 1938 New York's MOMA mounted an exhibition called "Bauhaus 1919-1928" and The Burlington Galleries in London mounted the "20th German Art Show." Although successful, these "alternative" art exhibits were more modest, less strident and less Jewish versions of modernism that the Nazis themselves mounted.

The Nazis actively promoted paintings and sculptures that were narrowly traditional and that exalted the true blood and soil values of racial purity, nationalism, militarism, health and obedience. They referred to this kind of art as Heroic Romantic Realism. The New Aesthetics proposed that German art had to serve a state purpose

Let us go back to consider outsider art. I need to reiterate that Prinzhorn's book brought about a shift in values. The artists' essential insights of the deepest strata of the mind placed their work on equal footing with "professional art." The first proper exhibition of outsider art and Art Brut called "Outsiders," took place at the Hayward Gallery in London in 1978 and attracted much interest. An exhibition in our LACMA of Dubuffet's work in 1962 had already had much impact on California artists. A selection of over 200 drawings by 53 artists from the Prinzhorn collection was exhibited for the first time in 2000 at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, under the title "Traces upon the Wunderblock." This exhibition marked the last time that the work would be loaned before it went on permanent display in 2001 in a museum dedicated to them at the U. of Heidelberg, the realization of Prinzhorn's vision.

Then came another exhibit at LACMA you may remember, entitled, "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting (1890-1985)" and its sequel, "Parallel Visions: Modern Artists and Outsider Art, 1992-93." In Parallel Visions - I highly recommend the catalogue from that exhibition - we find contemporary artists side by side with the outsider artists who inspired them, just as in the "Degenerate Art" exhibit of 1937 paintings and sculptures could have paired up with those who had inspired them.

Andy Nasisse (born in 1945) exemplifies an American mainstream artist. He has both documented and collected the work of numerous outsiders, including Murry and Finster. In the same spirit as Dubuffet many years before, he writes, "I guess I am fascinated by the sense of inspired innocence outsider art reveals. Often the visionary doesn't even identify what they make as being 'art'. Many are illiterate and few have ever been to a museum or gallery. The work they make is not conditioned by society's definitions and limitations and is consequently startlingly fresh and truly inspired. Their work is made out of vital needs, obsessions, and compulsions and their motivations are honest, pure and intense...I think that is what makes good art, when it transcends the artist's intentions" (p 223). Nasisse uses this benchmark for the work of all artists, insiders and outsiders.

However, we could say that while outside artists are only interested in

manifesting externally what is in their inner world, mainstream artists also see themselves as a product of the culture and are not only concerned with fitting in but in being contributors to the culture.

In 1984 artist Bolek Greczynski and Janos Marton, a psychologist at Creedmoor Psychiatric Center in Queens Village, New York City, hatched the idea of setting up an art program for hospital residents in Building 75, the Center's 40,000 square foot abandoned kitchen and dining hall. They cleaned up the space and invited patients to fill it with artwork. Over 700 patients have worked in the space since then. The now-called Living Museum is both studio and museum – an art space open to visitors and a studio that invites the constant production of new works. The artists in residence are self-taught. It can be considered a laboratory in which cultural ideas and perceptions are destabilized for artists and viewers. Greczynski and Marton have valued the potential for growth and development in the disruption that viewers may experience while viewing this art as much as the difficult moments the artists experience while creating it. The Living Museum is rapidly gaining recognition as a truly innovative concept. It is so far the only program of its kind in the US. Working among colleagues in a nurturing and stress-free environment, members are transformed from the stigmatized identity of being "mental patients" to the more hopeful and healing self-image of being "artists".

So what is the nature of creativity? Back to the Prinzhorn's collection one can see that it embraces an enormous diversity of creative approaches, which makes it impossible to define overall. There are no grounds for the notion that this is an Art Brut collection, comparable with the Dubuffet's collection in Lausanne. A significant part does consist of works that can be called Art Brut but also of exploratory works in the spirit of 20th century art. Most commonly psychotic art contains a combination of Art Brut, exploratory art and naïve art. The most important outcome that can result from seeing this collection, even if only in reproductions or in film, is the expansion of the limits of our view of what can be possible in the mind. Psychotic art becomes an opportunity to engage in a confrontation with our own unconscious. It is exciting but also frightening. The good news is that it is the result of a creative impulse that does lead to growth and development both in the creator and in the viewer.

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