

# CREATIVITY AND DESTRUCTIVENESS IN ART AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

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*This paper focuses on the creativity of the patient in analysis and compares it to that of the artist. Taking artists' descriptions of their practices as its starting point, the paper suggests that the relationship between patient and analyst parallels that between artist and medium. Psychoanalysis and artistic process can both be seen in terms of a complex interplay between oneness and separateness in which aggression and destructiveness play an essential part. The paper includes a discussion of different forms of aggression and destructiveness within the creative process with particular reference to Winnicott's paper 'The use of an object' (1969) and Rozsika Parker's 'Killing the angel in the house' (1998). It suggests that a consideration of artists' creative processes can shed light both on the experience of the patient in analysis and on the role of the analyst in facilitating the development of the patient's creativity.*

**KEY WORDS:** ART/AESTHETICS, PSYCHOANALYSIS, CREATIVITY, DESTRUCTIVENESS, PROCESS

Every act of creation is first an act of destruction.  
(Pablo Picasso)

## INTRODUCTION

A number of recent papers addressing the issue of creativity in psychoanalysis have focused on the experience of the analyst (Sabbadini, 2013) or the joint enterprise undertaken by analyst and patient together (Bollas, 2011; Abella, 2013). In this essay I want to shift the emphasis to consider specifically the creativity of the patient. If an analysis is to be successful, the patient must discover his own creative process. But is the patient's creativity peculiar to the situation of an analysis or does it have something in common with the creative process of artists? To address this question, I take artists' accounts of their practices as my starting point and discuss the parallels

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The paper was Commended in the Rozsika Parker Prize 2013 (Post-Qualification Path).

and divergences between the artist's experience and the patient's experience of an analysis.<sup>1</sup>

#### ARTIST, PATIENT AND MEDIUM

I begin by considering the artist's practice at the point when she engages with her medium<sup>2</sup> in order to make a new work. Of course, this dialogue between artist and nascent artwork is not the beginning of the artist's creative process. She is likely to be familiar with the properties of her medium and may have a long history of previous works. She may also have some idea of the way in which she wants this particular piece to evolve.<sup>3</sup> However, whatever has gone before, the point at which the idea is put into practice marks the beginning of the interaction between artist and medium that I am calling a 'dialogue'.

The artist Louise Bourgeois describes how she approaches her work with stone:

I contemplate the penetrated cube for a long time. Then I try to express what I have to say, how I am going to translate what I have to say to it. I try to translate my problem into the stone. The drilling begins the process by negating the stone. The problem is how to complete the negation, to take away from the stone, without altogether destroying it, but overcoming it, conquering it. The cube no longer exists as a pure form for contemplation; it becomes an image. I take it over with my fantasy, my life force. I put it to the use of my unconscious . . . (Bourgeois, 2012, p. 40)

Bourgeois infuses the stone with her fantasy (conscious and unconscious) and 'translates' her 'problem' into the material. Initially, at least, it seems that Bourgeois relates to the stone as if it is part of her inner world. Yet, at the same time, she wants to 'say' something to it, implying that it is also experienced as separate from her and able to enter into some sort of dialogue with her.

Unlike Bourgeois, the sculptor Phyllida Barlow does not start with something she wants to 'say' to her medium. She wants the behaviour of her materials to disclose what it is she wishes to explore:

I'm interested in the act itself – whether it's pulled, stretched . . . I want the actions to lead me to the image. I don't have a subject. I hope the subject will reveal itself through the process . . . I am interested in whether the process has engaged me – whether I'm surprised or alarmed – that is a signal that it has some sort of life about it. (Barlow, 2012)

This interest in the response of the materials is also expressed by the painter Jenny Saville who describes the complex relationship between her and her medium as she works:

When I'm in the process of working an area of the painting, in my head I have an idea of a sequence of marks I'd like to try. Usually it doesn't work out like I planned – sometimes it's better and more suggestive than I'd imagined, but often it feels like a potential disaster and I panic. Adrenaline sets in, as a kind of rush

where you're pulling all these paint strings to articulate something and you have to hold your nerve. Just one mark can start to pull together something that has no structure. It's a weird game of control – trying to get to it – to suck it out of yourself and out of the painting. There is a moment when the painting starts to breathe, it gets a kind of presence. (Saville, 2012, p. 318)

Saville speaks here of the developing artwork as a living, breathing being as if it has become another person. She is engaged in a 'game of control' in which there is an attempt to coerce it into the shape she has (consciously) imagined whilst at the same time she is responsive to its own suggestions, learning from her medium as well as imposing her will on it.

Dana Schutz, also a painter, describes the way in which her paint resists her intentions:

You know what you want it to be like and then it goes off the rails . . . the paint will do its own thing. It is a physical dance, you respond to it and if it is going well you forget that you are painting, it just feels like you are responding to it. (Schutz, 2013, p. 59)

Schutz, Barlow and Saville speak as if the developing artwork has a life of its own. It acquires a liveliness or a 'presence' such that it is able to respond to them and affect the direction of the work, precluding some avenues but also suggesting unexpected ways forward. Of course, the response of the medium is partly a result of the inherent properties of the materials. Paint behaves in a certain way, particular effects can be created using a computer programme and so on. But the language these artists use to describe their relationships with their media suggests something more. They speak of a liveliness that can only come about through the intervention of the artist herself. It seems that, from the moment she begins to work with her medium, the artist imbues it with aspects of her inner world. She enters into a dialogue with a medium that has become an amalgam of an aspect of her 'fantasy' or 'life force' (to use Bourgeois' terms) and the intrinsic qualities of her materials.

The psychoanalyst Kenneth Wright draws a parallel between the artist's relationship with her medium and the relationship of mother and child (Wright, 2009b). Referring to D. W. Winnicott's concept of mirroring (Winnicott, 1971), Wright suggests that the medium is used by the artist to perform some of the roles of the adaptive or mirroring 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*' (*ibid.*, p. 131). This mirroring can be seen as an aspect of the adaptive mother in that the mother's face reflects her response to the infant's internal state just as the 'breast' corresponds with the infant's need and anticipation. 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 'as though the

creative person, in the act of creation, performs for himself the activities which the adaptive mother once provided' (Wright, 2009a, p. 62).

This dialogue between the artist and her medium has a direct parallel in psychoanalysis. Just as, according to Wright, the artist attempts to mould her medium into a mirroring role, so the patient may unconsciously exert pressure on the analyst to take on a similar function. In more or less subtle ways the patient recruits the analyst to play a part in his internal drama. The psychoanalyst and artist Marion Milner describes her psychoanalytic work with an 11-year-old boy (Milner, 1952b) and the boy's use of her in a complex drama enacted through his play with toys and other materials in the consulting room. The drama, which included destructive acts such as fire setting, was directed by the boy and Milner was required to play a series of parts. She describes the way in which she allowed him to use her whilst also maintaining her analytic stance through her interpretations. The psychoanalyst Michael Parsons (Parsons, 2000) compares the boy's relationship with Milner to the artist's relationship with her medium:

The boy used her as a pliable medium that he could mould however he wanted except that she also had qualities of her own to be taken account of. So his being able to make things out of his pliable medium depended also on his discovering things about it at the same time. The artist has just such a relation to his or her artistic medium. The mixed process of invention and discovery is the same. (Parsons, 2000, p. 162)

The artist's medium and the analyst are both used as if they are part of the artist's or patient's inner drama and yet there is also a recognition that they exist in their own right in the external world.

Joseph Sandler has written about 'role-responsiveness' in psychoanalysis as the way in which the patient exerts pressure on the analyst to behave in particular ways in relation to him:

What I want to emphasize is that the role-relationship of the patient in analysis at any particular time consists of a role in which he casts himself, and a *complementary* role in which he casts the analyst at that particular time. The patient's transference would thus represent an attempt by him to impose an interaction, an interrelationship (in the broadest sense of the word) between himself and the analyst. (Sandler, 1976, p. 44)

Sandler suggests that the analyst will normally comply unconsciously with the role demanded of him, integrating it into his usual mode of behaviour, until something occurs to bring his attention to the situation. He describes a case in which he noticed that he (Sandler) was talking more than was usual for him. He realized that, in subtle ways, the patient was seeking reassurance from him. Once he had understood this dynamic he was able to make an interpretation to the patient and the meaning of the patient's behaviour could be explored. Here, then, Sandler as medium allowed himself to be directed and moulded by the patient initially but then asserted his separateness through his interpretation.

## ONENESS AND SEPARATENESS

This raises the question of the extent to which the patient or artist relates to the analyst or medium as a separate object and the extent to which they are experienced as part of the patient or artist's own inner world. Writing of her experience of painting, Milner writes about 'losing oneself in an activity' and describes her sense that at times there is a fusion between herself and her artwork (Milner, 1969). She links this with the concept of illusion which she defines as 'moments when the inner and the outer seem to co-incide' (*ibid.*, p. 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. Milner sees illusion as indispensable to creativity, a 'bridge to objectivity' (Milner, 1957, p. 53) and a necessary precursor to a sense of 'twoness' or separateness. For her, the process of painting involves a movement between a sense of oneness with the work – an absorption that involves a loss of self-awareness – and a sense of separation from it. As the artist Tomoko Takahashi says: 'you can lose yourself in it and that's quite important somehow. If you don't get lost in it, something you are not too conscious about doesn't come out' (Fortnum, 2007, p. 150).

Winnicott uses the term 'object-relating' to refer to the situation in which the subject interacts with the object as if it were 'a bundle of projections' (Winnicott, 1969). 'Object use', on the other hand, implies the subject's recognition that an object exists in its own right and has its own properties:

... may I leave it at that, that relating can be described in terms of the individual subject, and that usage cannot be described except in terms of acceptance of the object's independent existence, its property of having been there all the time? (Winnicott, 1969, p. 712)

According to Winnicott, the baby's transition from object relating to object usage does not happen automatically but comes about through the baby's 'destruction' of the object. The subject must 'destroy' the object *in fantasy* and the object must survive this 'destruction'. The subject's discovery that the object has survived his attacks establishes the object's 'otherness', its existence outside the area of his omnipotent control. The subject can then begin to use and interact with an object which has its own characteristics and which can respond according to its own nature.

Winnicott himself related these ideas not only to the relationship between an infant and its mother but also to the situation of the patient in analysis:

If it is in an analysis that these matters are taking place, then the analyst, the analytic technique, and the analytic setting all come in as surviving or not surviving the patient's destructive attacks. This destructive activity is the patient's attempt to place the analyst outside the area of omnipotent control, that is, out in the world. (Winnicott, 1969, p. 714)

I think that Winnicott's description of the path to object usage also sheds light on the relationship between artist and medium. In a sense, the whole process of creating a new artwork can be seen as one of externalizing the inner experience of the artist in which the artist brings about this externality through both creative and destructive

activity. On a concrete level, this is evident in Bourgeois' description of her interaction with her medium. She has to find a way of 'overcoming' and 'conquering' the stone, suggesting that she is engaged in a struggle or battle in which the medium fights back or resists her. At the same time, she must not destroy the stone completely. It must survive 'destruction' and retain something of its own character. Of course, Winnicott is not writing of physical attack but of the destruction of a fantasy object. The external object is experienced as separate from the subject through its survival of these attacks. It may be argued that the artist's attacks on her medium are part and parcel of her craft but I suggest that, alongside this realistic use of her materials, is an attack on the fantasy art object. In the process of producing a new work this fantasy object must be continually destroyed and recreated until such time as the artist feels that the new artwork can stand on its own. It has become an external object existing in its own right.

#### DESTRUCTIVENESS AND AGGRESSION

Joyce McDougall, a member of the Paris Psychoanalytical Society who weaves together elements from Freudian, Kleinian, Lacanian and Winnicottian schools, writes of the artist's feelings of union with the medium alongside the need to impose her ideas upon it. She suggests that the medium is 'both an ally and an enemy' and that it must be 'tamed' by the artist. She insists on the place of violence and destructiveness in creativity, writing '*violence is an essential element in all creative production*' (McDougall, 1995, p. 55). Whether the finished artwork betrays it or not, the process of making art inevitably involves some degree of destruction as a new piece can only be created by using, or destroying, the materials which are necessary for its production. The painter Howard Hodgkin explains his choice of wood rather than canvas for his painting by saying 'I want to be able to attack again and again and again, and the trouble with canvas is that if you attack it more than once or twice there's nothing left' (Bickers & Wilson, 2007, p. 226). The canvas is of no use to Hodgkin as it is not sufficiently strong to withstand the aggression that is integral to his process.

The writer and psychotherapist Rozsika Parker addresses the issue of aggression in the creative process in her paper 'Killing the angel in the house' (Parker, 1998), writing: 'In my view, aggression is needed not to provide the motivation for reparation, sublimation or reaction formation but quite simply because the processes of creative work *demand it*' (*ibid.*, p. 763). She takes up Virginia Woolf's metaphor of the 'angel' who interferes with her writing by insisting she please her audience. Woolf sees the 'angel' as a peculiarly feminine affliction but Parker suggests not only that the 'angel' appears to artists of both genders but also that both the 'angel' and her counterpart, the 'devil', the instigator of aggression, are necessary to artistic creativity. However, Parker is not writing about aggression towards the medium as discussed above but, rather, aggression towards an audience who may not approve of the new creation. She makes the point that creativity cannot be considered only in terms of internal reality:

When we write, paint, garden or sew we never simply make a thing; rather we enter into a network of relationships with, for example, contemporary practices,

with our own creative history, with materials, with colleagues and of course with imaginary audiences and internal figures. (Parker, 1998, p. 758)

Concerns about the possible reactions of the audience may be inhibiting, as Parker discusses. The artist must summon the necessary aggression (the 'devil') to overcome these concerns 'without losing the critical awareness of the conditions of reception that is the positive attribute of the angel' (*ibid.*, p. 578).

I would like to explore the different types of aggression involved in creativity in more detail. I agree with Parker's insistence on the importance of the social and cultural in art making, and the fact that the artist is aware that she is making her work for an audience. However, I suggest that, whilst she is in the process of creating a new work, the artist must leave behind any concerns about the judgement of others in order to be free to experiment. She must silence (temporarily) not only her attention to the opinions of others but also her own internal judgemental voice. The artist Philip Guston writes about the need to suspend judgement while painting: 'Everything is possible, except dogma of any kind . . . the worst thing in the world is to make judgements' (Guston, 2011, p. 89). The artist Grayson Perry talks of the need to consider ideas that may seem ridiculous if the artist's own critical voice is allowed to intervene:

My favourite quote about having ideas comes from *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* . . . he's like in a clearing in the forest and the ideas are like little furry creatures that are in the undergrowth and one of them will come out . . . the brave one will come out, and it will come up to him, and all the others are looking to see how it's treated . . . If you kind of go 'Oh! Rubbish!', then you think 'Oh right, I'm not going to bother'. What you've got to do, you've got to accept your own silliness in a way. (Perry, 2012)

Of course, it is not only silliness that the artist needs to accept in herself but also the destructiveness that is expressed through aggression towards the medium and that is integral to object usage. However, the form of aggression discussed by Parker relates to the social context, specifically to the fear of a hostile reaction from a potential audience. I think that this differs from the aggression inherent in the use of a medium. I agree with Parker that the artist must give herself permission to enter a creative state of mind, to allow herself 'silliness' and destructiveness, and Parker's 'devil' is needed to help her to silence her 'angel' temporarily. This sets the scene for the artist to become fully engaged in making a new work (when another type of aggression comes into play, that of the 'attack' on the medium described above). Then, when a work is complete, the artist must dare to reveal it to her audience. For this, the 'devil' is required again but this time in tandem with the 'angel's' 'concern with the impact of a piece of work on the other' (Parker, 1998, p. 758).

This concern with the response of an audience has its parallel in an analysis. Some patients initially experience a desire to please the analyst, perhaps by presenting interesting material or by being a 'good' patient who responds appreciatively to interpretations. Just as the artist must summon her aggression (Parker's 'devil') in order to allow herself to move into the creative space of engagement with her medium,



to 'use' her medium, so it is only when, with the help of the analyst, the patient becomes able to assert her individuality that she can 'use' the analyst, in Winnicott's sense of the term, and this will involve a different order of aggression. Just as the artist attacks or destroys the medium in an attempt to coerce it into the form she desires, so the patient not only nudges the analyst into responsive roles, as described by Sandler, but also attempts violently to coerce the analyst into behaving in ways which reflect her inner drama. It is through processing these responses rather than acting them out that the analyst survives destruction and becomes of use to the patient.

#### THE NEED FOR CONTAINMENT

So far, I have considered the artist's moments of fusion or oneness with the developing artwork and the destructiveness that is necessary for the medium to become experienced as external and available for 'use'. It seems that creating a new artwork is a risky enterprise. Milner, writing about 'losing oneself in an activity', refers to the need for a 'safe setting, a setting that will still be there when one emerges again into ordinary self-awareness' (Milner, 1952a, p. 81). Similarly, Wright suggests that, in order to enter 'an aesthetic state of mind', the artist needs a space set apart from everyday life, a 'domain of contemplation' (Wright, 2009b). Wright describes Henry Moore's practice of collecting pieces of driftwood and other items and keeping them in his studio where they may inspire him in relation to new works. His studio becomes a 'templum', a physical space that embodies the conditions for entering a particular mental space where creative work can take place. For some artists, including Moore, the studio provides an essential environment in which to work. It offers physical boundaries and the possibility of temporal ones too in that the artist may decide to spend certain periods of time in this space. Within the studio, the artist enters a frame of mind different to that of everyday concerns. The artist Shirazeh Houshiary speaks of the importance of the studio for her:

When you're in the outside world, you are busy with domestic or everyday events. Here you leave all that behind; it's a place where you are free, without any involvement with the outside world . . . it is a place to let go. (Amirsadeghi & Homayoun Eisler, 2012, p. 54)

Rachel Kneebone sees her studio as an 'anchor' but says that work there is not always enjoyable: ' . . . some of my biggest fights have been in here, with my work and with frustration and boredom' (*ibid.*, p. 167). However, not all artists work in studios and the creation of a safe setting does not necessarily require a particular physical space. Some artists are able to move into a different psychic space in a variety of situations. Grayson Perry, in his autobiography (Jones & Perry, 2007), speaks of his internal 'mental shed' where he can consider works in progress or ideas for new works wherever he may be. The artist Shezad Dawood speaks of 'a kind of inner mansion where you have a number of connecting rooms' where creative thought can take place (Amirsadeghi & Homayoun Eisler, 2012, p. 40).

The physical boundaries of the studio and the mental boundaries of the inner mansion or mental shed mark off, or frame, a particular space. Similarly, the physical



frame of an artwork can act as a container. Tomma Abts says of the format she uses for her paintings: 'At some point I decided on that size. It felt right. I think it relates to the size of a head space. The vertical format holds the space tight. A landscape format would let the tension flow out on the sides' (Abts, 2013, p. 58).

Marion Milner writes that the frame 'marks off an area within which what is perceived has to be taken symbolically, while what is outside the frame is taken literally' (Milner, 1957, p. 158). The frame here can be understood in a wide sense to include not only the frame of a two-dimensional work but also the frame of the screen, the edges of a sculptural object or installation and the temporal limits of a play or film. The concept of the frame can also be extended to include the boundaries provided by rules or procedures. The artist and writer Rebecca Fortnum has interviewed women artists about their working practices (Fortnum, 2007). She describes the total engagement of the artist at work as 'living in' the artwork and suggests that each artist creates the conditions for this state of mind by putting procedural boundaries in place, including those imposed by the limits of the chosen medium. These limits, she contends, do not restrict the artist but, on the contrary, provide an enabling structure that gives a sense of freedom (Fortnum, 2005). In her interview with Fortnum, Vanessa Jackson speaks of the importance of setting up rules in order to 'set up a space that I can dwell in' (Fortnum, 2007, p. 139), highlighting the importance of creating a psychological space in which to work. In specific ways that are pertinent to their own practices, then, each artist sets up a frame that acts as a boundary separating two types of activity. Outside the frame lies the external world organized according to a 'reality' shared with others. Inside the frame lies an internal world, a subjectively based organization of the self.

There is a parallel here with the mother's relationship to her baby. 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, p. 7)

Here Winnicott suggests that the mother holds and contains her infant both physically and mentally and this 'facilitating environment' offers her child a protected space in which to develop. One of the essential roles of the artist is to provide a 'facilitating environment' for the ongoing relationship between her and her artwork.

Just as the artist needs certain conditions in order to enter the state of mind necessary for her creative process, the patient in analysis needs the analyst to provide a safe space within which she can engage in the analysis. The artist must provide herself with these boundaries and conditions whilst, in an analysis, the analyst takes on this role, metaphorically holding the patient through the provision of a space

protected from outside impingements. The physical environment of the consulting room, the prescribed duration of the analytic session, the analytic 'rules' and the professionalism of the analyst act together to give the patient some sense of safety and containment. The psychoanalyst Andrea Sabbadini compares the analyst's consulting room to the artist's studio, writing that within the 'consistent and therefore relatively safe space provided by our "studios"' (Sabbadini, 2013, p. 120) the analyst can make creative use of the material brought by the patient. Here it is the analyst rather than the patient who takes on one of the functions performed by the artist.

In his formulation, Sabbadini writes that the analyst's task 'involves the creative use of the material brought to us by our patients, in combination with that brought to sessions by our own personal and professional experience'. Can we then say that the analyst uses the patient's material as her medium? Sabbadini implies this when he goes on to write: 'As psychoanalysts, we are editors involved in the selection, cutting and pasting together of dissociated fragments, out of which we help re-create old pictures, or create new ones' (*ibid.*, p. 121). Perhaps this 'cutting' can be understood in terms of destructiveness and object usage in Winnicott's sense of the term. However, my own view is that Sabbadini's emphasis on the creativity of the analyst leaves out the essential importance of the analyst's role as facilitator of the *patient's* creativity. The aim of an analysis is to provide the conditions that eventually enable the patient to 'cut and paste' for himself.

#### CONCLUSION

In this paper I focus on the fact that the patient in analysis is engaged in a creative process and I suggest that this creativity parallels that of the artist. The patient uses the analyst as a 'medium', pliable enough to be responsive to his communications but retaining her own particular qualities. The analyst 'medium' must also withstand the patient's attacks in order to become of 'use' (in Winnicott's sense of the word). For both patient and artist, these processes call for safe boundaries and the containment provided by the artist's studio and the parameters of her practice have their counterpart in the holding environment of the analysis. However, alongside these parallels, there are essential differences between the experience of the artist and that of the patient. Not least is the fact that, although the artist's medium has its own inherent properties, its liveliness or 'presence' is brought about by its embodiment of the artist's own 'life force'. By contrast, of course, the analyst has her own independent life before the beginning of the analysis.

A central aspect of the analyst's role is to foster the patient's creativity. By allowing herself to act as the patient's medium, through her survival of the patient's attacks and through her provision of the contained space of the analytic 'studio', the analyst provides the conditions for the patient to discover and develop his own creative process.

#### NOTES

1. In the interests of clarity, I use the pronoun 'he' for the patient and 'she' for the artist and the analyst.

2. Here I use the term medium in its widest sense to include not only physical materials such as paint or clay but also computer programmes, persons involved in performances etc.
3. In this paper, I will not address the question of how an idea for a new work arises. For a consideration of this issue, see 'A life of its own: The relationship between artist, idea and artwork' (Townsend, 2014).

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