

CREATIVE STATES OF MIND

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE ARTIST'S PROCESS

PATRICIA TOWNSEND

ROUTLEDGE



CREATIVE STATES OF MIND

What is it like to be an artist? Drawing on interviews with professional artists, this book takes the reader inside the creative process. The author, an artist and a psychotherapist, uses psychoanalytic theory to shed light on fundamental questions such as the origin of new ideas and the artist's state of mind while working.

Based on interviews with 33 professional artists, who reflect on their experiences of creating new works of art, as well as her own artistic practice, Patricia Townsend traces the trajectory of the creative process from the artist's first inkling or 'pre-sense', through to the completion of a work, and its release to the public. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, particularly the work of Donald Winnicott, Marion Milner and Christopher Bollas, the book presents the artist's process as a series of interconnected and overlapping stages, in which there is a movement between the artist's inner world, the outer world of shared 'reality', and the spaces in-between.

Creative States of Mind: Psychoanalysis and the Artist's Process fills an important gap in the psychoanalytic theory of art by offering an account of the full trajectory of the artist's process based on the evidence of artists themselves. It will be useful to artists who want to understand more about their own processes, to psychoanalysts and psychotherapists in their clinical work, and to anyone who studies the creative process.

Patricia Townsend is an artist, working with video, photography and installation, and a psychoanalytic psychotherapist. Her artworks have been exhibited widely and her writing on psychoanalysis and the artist's process has appeared in a variety of publications. She recently completed a PhD at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London.

'This is a highly original and extremely rich study of the artistic process as one of creative *processing*, or *working through*. Valuably based on interviews with other artists as well as on Townsend's self-reflection on her own artwork, this book compellingly argues that artistic forms grow out of our inner worlds but are not simply a representation of these. This study is the most resonant and detailed psychoanalytic account of creative processes that I have read since the work of Marion Milner. Like Milner's contributions to our understanding of art, it should be an essential read for artists as well as for those who study them, or seek to understand artworks.'

Catherine Grant, Professor of Digital Media and Screen Studies, Birkbeck, University of London.

'Psychoanalysis has struggled to understand the process of artistic creativity *from the inside*, but Patricia Townsend's outstanding book draws on interviews with professional artists as well as her own experience to investigate the process, from the artist's first awareness of a creative work through to its emergence into the world. Taking cues from Donald Winnicott, Marion Milner and Christopher Bollas in particular she builds a convincing and subtle account of the unfolding creative act, which will engage anyone interested in how it is that we relate creatively to our worlds.'

Ken Robinson, Psychoanalyst, Visiting Professor of Psychoanalysis, Northumbria University.

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Psychoanalysis and
the Artist's Process

Patricia Townsend

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FOREWORD

Freud's attitude to artistic creation was complex and contradictory, for while he loved the arts and held them in high regard, he treated them as quasi-neurotic phenomena when he viewed them through his psychoanalytic lens. This pathological bias cast a shadow over psychoanalytic writing for years to come, and the idea that art is a devious expression of repressed impulses has influenced the way that art is viewed to the present day. It has led to a complicated relationship between psychoanalysis and art, for while psychoanalysis can fascinate by seeming to reveal the 'secrets' of art, it is frequently criticised for reducing it to its basic elements and thus devaluing it.

There is little doubt that this pathological, reductive skew has curtailed more open exploration of artistic creativity from a psychoanalytic perspective. Although many analysts have questioned Freud's original approach, attempts to create alternative theories have been few. It is true that the Kleinian school, in the work of Hanna Segal, has developed a more comprehensive theory of artistic creation, but as in Freud's original model, this is tied to a theoretical shibboleth, the need of the artist to make reparation for primitive destructive impulses.

Creativity and imagination have long been of interest to Independent psychoanalysts of the British Society but, although their ideas are often suggestive, no coherent theory of artistic creation has emerged from their writing. Winnicott's work is a case in point, for while it establishes a radically new conceptual space for thinking about art, its novel dimensions are never completely worked out. The closed conceptual system was contrary to Winnicott's way of thinking and, in contrast to Freud, he never tried to set out his ideas in the form of a finished theory.

Winnicott's writing on creativity exemplifies this, for while he insisted, against Melanie Klein, on the crucial role of the mother's responsiveness in infant development and explored the origins of creativity in this adaptive relationship, he

never developed a theory of art in its own right. He traced a line from the infant's *primary creativity* (creating the breast that the mother provides) through *transitional phenomena* and childhood play to adult creativity, including the arts, but was more concerned with creative living as a universal potential than with its specific development in the creative arts.

For the psychoanalytic observer interested in art, this gap in theory is a tantalising challenge: can psychoanalysis throw light on art without reducing and devaluing it? The author of this book, Patricia Townsend, is both artist and psychoanalytic psychotherapist, and this unique position informs her approach. As artist, she explores the phenomenology of artistic creation, using her own experience and that of the many professional artists whom she interviewed to take us *into* the creative experience. She shows us what it is like to *be* the artist and allows us to glimpse the creative process from its first stirrings as 'hunch', or 'pre-sense', to its gradual emergence as material form. She allows us to share in the difficulties of entering a creative state of mind and the satisfactions, tempered with disillusionment, of creating a work. Out of this raw material, she extracts recurrent themes and, as psychoanalytic observer, she explores these in the light of contemporary psychoanalytic ideas. Her approach leans heavily, but not exclusively, on Donald Winnicott, Marion Milner and Christopher Bollas, but she also draws on non-analytic sources, in particular the work of Anton Ehrenzweig and Susanne Langer.

This book fills an important gap in psychoanalytic theorising about art and offers a coherent account of the artistic process from an independent perspective. I predict it will become an important source book for writers on art, and it lays the foundation for a more relational view of art and the function it has in the lives of both artist and viewer.

Ken Wright
July 2018

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Finally, I want to express my gratitude to the artists who allowed me to interview them and who made this project possible. I am deeply grateful for their generosity in speaking so openly about their creative processes and for allowing me to quote from their interviews in this research. Their contributions are at the heart of this book.

INTRODUCTION

What happens in the mind of an artist as he or she creates a new work of art? Is it possible to understand and explain artists' states of mind or, as many believe, is the creative process so elusive and mysterious that any attempt to grasp it is doomed to failure? The seeds of this book were sown when, as a practising artist, I began to ask myself these questions, becoming increasingly curious about my own process of making art. I tried to pinpoint the moment when a new work begins and realised that, at first, I often have a vague intimation of what I want my subject to be but little sense of what form the potential new artwork might take. Sometimes there is a long time gap before an idea, an image of a form for the new work, emerges. When the idea arrives, it often does so suddenly and unexpectedly, as if coming from nowhere. I was puzzled about why, when this happens, I feel so elated, as if this were the perfect solution, even though I know from experience that sooner or later (and usually sooner) this elation will evaporate and the idea will seem at best flawed or at worst useless. It was clear to me from my own practice that making art involves inner processes, outside my awareness, operating in tandem with my interactions with the outside world, and I wanted to explore this further.

I wanted to trace the life story of new works of art from the moment of the artist's first inkling that she¹ is onto something to the completion of the work and its launch into the outside world. But it is generally recognised that artists are a particularly diverse set of individuals, each with their particular way of working, so I could not assume that my own experiences were shared by others. And perhaps other artists experienced states of mind that I did not. Indeed, it could be that each artist's process was so idiosyncratic that no common threads could be found. The way to test this out, of course, was to talk to other artists, and I set out to do this, beginning with the artists' group to which I belonged, and eventually conducting a formal qualitative research study involving interviews

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with 33 professional visual artists.² In these interviews, I was interested not only in what artists *do* as they make new works but also what they *feel*.

Although each artist had his or her own story to tell and the research revealed many differences between the processes of individual artists, there were also patterns in common. For instance, I found that my own experience of ideas bursting suddenly into consciousness was shared by many (but not all) the artists I interviewed. Others began work with their medium without a particular idea in mind and looked to the behaviour of the paint or other material to lead them to a subject for the work. I also found that, once they began work with their medium, artists' ideas of what they wanted to make would often change in response to the behaviour of their materials, so that they felt themselves to be involved in a dialogue with the medium out of which the form of the work gradually emerged. While working with their medium, many artists described being deeply absorbed in what some called a 'trance-like' state which must not be interrupted and which called for a contained physical space, such as a studio, and a bounded space of time set apart from everyday life. Gradually, the developing work took on its final form, acquiring what many artists called its own 'life'. Once this life was established, the artist could let the work go into the outside world, and this separation seemed to be a relief for some artists and a painful wrench for others.

Some aspects of this emerging picture corresponded with expectations I had from thinking about my own process. But there were also new discoveries about the work of other artists and new realisations about my own process. I found that, for many of the artists I interviewed, each particular new artwork is triggered by an encounter with something in the outside world that seems to hold a personal significance. Although the artist might not be able to say what its significance is, this 'something' carries the promise that it could lead to a new artwork. I discuss this in Chapter 1, and I have called this experience of sensing the potential of something external the 'pre-sense'. At this point, though, the artist rarely has a clear idea of the form the potential artwork might take. A period of gestation in which nothing much seems to be happening is often necessary before a more specific idea of a form emerges. I consider this in detail in Chapters 2 and 3.

Chapter 4 goes on to consider the artist's relationship with her medium as she begins to translate her idea into a physical form. The interviews provided a great deal of evidence about how it feels to be in the process of making a work and the particular kind of concentration this involves. Artists spoke both about a state of deep involvement and about a focused attention that allows them to make moment to moment decisions about how to proceed. In Chapter 5, I introduce the terms 'extended self' and 'observer self' for these two states and discuss the ways in which artists experience them. Chapters 6 and 7 are also concerned with the stage of the artist's process when she is working with her medium. Several artists spoke of their work in terms of play, and Chapter 6 takes this up, whilst Chapter 7 links this to issues of creativity and destructiveness. Chapter 8 considers the space of the artwork and the external conditions the artist needs in order

to work. From the interviews, it emerged that artists often find it difficult to enter their working state of mind, to leave their everyday concerns behind, and that they may need certain ritual procedures to help them to do this. This has led me to think in terms of an 'internal frame', peculiar to whichever medium the artist uses, that must be entered before work can begin. This concept is developed in Chapter 9.

As all the interviewees are professional artists, most of their artworks are destined for exhibitions or for delivery to commissioners. Often, a new work may lead directly to the next, and there may be clear connections between works in a series. But there may also be deep connections between seemingly disparate works made at different times, and these ongoing themes may only emerge when the artist looks back over a long period. Chapter 10 deals with the experience of finishing a work and letting it go into the outside world, and Chapter 11 with the connections between past, present and future works.

The choice of a chronological order for the book may be thought to imply that the events described in one chapter follow in time sequence from those in the previous one. This may be the case, but I do not want to suggest that the stages of making a new work always follow one another in a linear way. At any point, there may be a return to an earlier stage, and there may sometimes be many repetitions of a phase or series of phases before the work can proceed. In this sense, the trajectory of a work might be thought of as a spiral, rather than a straight, timeline.

The artist interviews, wonderfully articulate and even poetic as they often were, provided a great deal of new evidence, but they could never give the whole story. As many of the artists pointed out, the process of making art involves not only states of which we are aware and which we can describe but also processes outside our awareness about which we can say nothing. So, inevitably, there are crucial gaps in the evidence provided both by my own recording of my process and by the interviews. To think about these gaps, I have turned to psychoanalysis.

Freud himself wrote extensively about particular artworks but tended to focus on an analysis of the artwork and the motivation of the artist rather than the process of creating. Freud saw art as an example of sublimation, where sublimation is the unconscious transformation of socially unacceptable impulses (particularly sexual impulses) into a more socially acceptable form. Melanie Klein took a different view, seeing the making of art as an act of reparation – an attempt to repair damage done to the mother in phantasy by the baby in the earliest stages of life. Many interesting writers, including Hanna Segal, Adrian Stokes and Anton Ehrenzweig, have built on Klein's theories to develop their own ideas about the making of art. According to Freud and, in a different way, to Klein, artists are engaged in an attempt to deal with an inner conflict. That is, the primary motivation for making art is an internal problem. This view takes little account of the artwork as an object in itself that mirrors some aspect of the outside world. The interviews suggest that these artists are searching for a form that will embody their own personal and unique experience of being in

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the world. That is, the aspect of the outer world that has triggered the making of a particular work is of central importance, inextricably linked with their inner experience. My impression, from the artist interviews and from my own experience, is that the value of an artwork lies in its intertwining of outer and inner worlds, and that its making involves a continuous movement between the two.

One group of psychoanalytic writers, mostly from the British Independent tradition, speaks to this view. The psychoanalyst and paediatrician D.W. Winnicott regards creativity not as the prerogative of artists but as an essential aspect of healthy living, and he traces its roots to the earliest interactions between mother and baby. He questions the divide between personal inner fantasy and shared external 'reality' and introduces the concepts of 'potential space' and 'transitional phenomena' to refer to an area in which inner and outer worlds co-incide. This is a creative space that is rooted in infancy and continues throughout life in play and later in cultural experience. Marion Milner, a psychoanalyst, painter and writer, develops similar ideas in her writing about her own process of making art and has much to say about the artist's state of mind. In particular, she introduces the concept of 'illusion' to describe a fusion between inner and outer worlds, between the artist and the developing artwork, suggesting that this experience of 'oneness' is an essential step on the path to the creation of an artwork with a life of its own. The psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas also builds on Winnicott's work. He writes about the mother's transformational effect on the infant when the feed she offers transforms the baby's experience. In health, throughout life we continue this work of transformation by choosing objects and experiences that will develop our 'idiom' and the artist's activity is one particular way of furthering this development. In this theoretical frame, one that I adopt in this book, the artist's activity is neither regressive nor reparative but, rather, is an adult development of these early experiences. The making of art, then, is part of a lifelong process of self-realisation. It is also, at the same time, a means of offering a new view of some element of the external world.

The writing of this book has required a constant coming and going between the interviews, my own experience and the theory. I have searched out theoretical writing that might illuminate a particular aspect of the artists' experiences, or of my own, and then have returned to the interviews to check the extent to which the theory corresponds with artists' reported experiences. I have continually returned to the work of Winnicott, Milner and Bollas, together with other writers, to try to understand the inner processes that may underpin the artists' accounts of their experiences. As I had expected, there are many differences between the experiences of individual artists so that, in linking theory with evidence and looking for common threads, I also had to take account of these divergences. Gradually, I built up a narrative of the development of a new artwork. But some gaps remained. It seemed to me that existing psychoanalytic theory could not account for everything described by the interviewees or by