

## Art and Psychosis

The essayist Robert Pinsky writes:

*(An artist) needs not so much an audience, as to feel a need to answer, a promise to respond. The promise may be a contradiction, it may be unwanted, it may go unheeded.... but it is owed, and the sense that it is owed is a basic requirement for the poet's good feeling about the art. This need to answer, as firm as a borrowed object or a cash debt, is the ground where the centaur walks. (1)*

For Freud, something in the artist's response is found in the presentation of the conflict between the instinctual drives and the allegiance to the civilisation s/he inhabits. He speaks of this antithesis in *Civilisation and its Discontents* and calls into question the efficacy of the equation that requires the individual to renounce so much for the benefit of the whole. Yet it is through art that the individual can exist with this antithesis and through art that the conflict can be witnessed.

Freud emphasised the central role of fantasy in the life of the artist who, unable to totally renounce h/er instinctual wishes, satisfies them through h/er creativity. These are then mediated through h/er particular abilities and moulded into a new form. Or as Pinsky would have it, a debt is repaid. The trajectory of this process being the return to reality. Ultimately, for Freud the genesis of the artistic function was an enigma.

Jacques Lacan, unconcerned with the particularities of the artist's psyche looks into the function of the painting in relation to the gaze and its satisfactions. He asks '*What is a picture?*' (2) and will later speak of *le sinthome* which is beyond psychoanalysis.

By looking at the work of artists who suffered from psychosis and used text beyond its narrative function as an integral part of the image, it becomes clear that their work is made up of irreducible symbols and that in psychosis the movement from reality to fantasy that is Freud's formula for art is rendered impossible.

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In a brief and unique moment in history, before the introduction of anti-psychotic drugs when the making of art by patients was encouraged by certain mental institutions, Hans Prinzhorn a psychiatrist working in Heidelberg, began to collect patients' art. Believing that the work spoke of primordial truths he undertook to make it available to the public. Prinzhorn developed a method of classifying patients by the images they made, noting two particular combinations that he found 'suspicious' in patients, "*the pointless logic applied to the repetition of detailed forms*" and the "*the construction of a scaffold on which to arrange the rabble of formal elements.*" (3) His research led him to discover that although schizophrenia does not create new talent, (many were artists before they became ill) the illness does seem to render the patient open to psychical processes that are usually only limited to the artist. Lacan later noted that there were certain 'beneficial traits' that occurred in psychosis such as a heightened appreciation of nature and a vivid recollection of childhood.

If, as Elizabeth Wright tells us '*The artist invites the spectator to share his lack - his desire and his lack. To mutually sustain a renunciation of fantasy*' (4) what does the psychotic artist ask of us? The usual function of fantasy is to merge the original experience of loss with the hallucinatory restoration of the object. Whilst speaking of something lost the artist seduces the gaze of the audience by demonstrating its absence. Yet according to Lacan, the psychotic structure does not acknowledge the primary loss of the mother that is instigated by the father in the Oedipus complex. It is this fundamental difference which completely alters the role of art .

The work of Adolf Wolfli 1864-1930 could be said to epitomise the genre of schizophrenic art. Wolfli usually worked from the outer frame inwards and his picture planes are always crammed with imagery. He had a name or neologism, number or notation to account for every single thing he encountered and frequently combined different disciplines. In one picture he calculates the 'Chimberasso Forest' in square hours and in another the water flow in 'The Waterfall in Zion'. Everything it seems had to be documented. However John MacGregor writes, 'It led him deeper into his illness, or into his creation, not back into our world... In later years his experience was increasingly unique, remote, obscure, even autistic.'

(5)

According to Lacan, disruption of language offers the most convincing evidence of the psychotic structure. Without its anchoring function there is a fluctuating sense of self that passes from megalomania to fear of annihilation and a loss of the 'I' altogether. The symbolic world of language that enables us to name and categorise things is a precondition for body and self-consciousness. Anything that cannot be categorised belongs to another register. Lacan suggests that it is the other's desire for an object that brings its specificity into focus. Therefore in psychosis where the other's desire is unacknowledged, objects remain indistinguishable and have to be specifically categorised and numbered (2). This renders metaphor impossible and suggests that there is no concept of the infinite in psychosis although there is equally a 'pathological freedom' (6) where the subject enters each situation as if anything were possible.

Another artist, Johann Knopf (1866-1910) would take walks through the aerial views he had drawn of his childhood home, turning the paper and adding birds as he progressed. Knopf's birds also illustrate his textual pieces and are associated with 'mysterious attacks'. It is unclear whether the birds are dead or alive, attackers or victims but what is so interesting is the reversal that occurs when the viewer has the birds'-eye view. It makes space collapse into a flat plane where birds and text meet, forcing the viewer to hover above. With so much ambiguity the eye cannot rest or understand the imagery and is left

with a sense of unease. Whilst we might enjoy the experience of laying down our gaze for a while as we experience the artist's journey from phantasy to reality here we are made uncomfortable by the sense of a provocative, persecutory gaze.

According to Lacan the understanding of physical space is installed in infancy. If however the separation from the mother is inadequate, as it is for the psychotic subject, s/he remains trapped in a dyadic understanding of space. We experience this in the pictures of Barbara Suckfull. All Suckfull's drawings, which have an aerial perspective, depict the domestic objects that were brought to her cell. There is no three dimensional space and each flattened object is outlined with a succession of 2's, crosses or pinpricks which form chains in an attempt to establish boundaries. (Dissolving of the ego in psychosis leads to the inability to determine where the subject ends and the Other begins.) Suckfull, it appears does not have the co-ordinates with which to understand the physical world. As there is no fixed view point she found it necessary to turn the paper as she worked. With both the object and the name placed on the paper via the gesture she attempts to stop meaning from sliding off. In an attempt to build herself a structure each word is pinned down with a full-stop. Here the nurse or 'Red Devil' brings in a washbasin:

*And.Today.It.Is.Sunday.Too.The.First.Sunday.After.The.Assumption.Too.And.So.  
It.Will.Be.The.Twenty-first.This.Is.Fine.I.Think.And.That.Is.the.Washbasin.You.See.  
I.Have.Drawn.That.Too.One.Time.Too.And.Then.Today.The.Redhead.Brought.Cold.Was  
hing.Water.It.Was.Too.Cold.What.She.Brought.Today.And.The.Second.Devil.  
Was.On.The.Lookout.I.Heard.That.Myself.Too.*

The words are carefully written in and around the linear image of the washbasin. All space is filled and even the spaces between words are punctuated. This is an example of Prinzhorn's 'horror vacui', the fear of the void where as we have seen in Wolfli's work, everything has to be accounted for including space.

Many of Prinzhorn's patients had a primary vision that acted as a cauldron for all subsequent work. It inaugurated the moment when a solution was found to the catastrophe and was a prerequisite for the subject to assume that s/he is imbued with god's divinity and is able to alter external events. If this is done through art, art becomes a magical ritual. Knopf frequently refers to the '*magic bullet spell*' indicating that he was dealing with supernatural forces in his imagery. (7)

One of Prinzhorn's patients Heinrich Welz believed that he could merge himself so completely with his drawing that '*the curve resulting from his concentration will magically incorporate some of the extract of the idea.*' (3) Eventually he simply scattered graphite over the paper and willed it to move. According to Ernst Kris the psychotic artist's intention is not to make art but to magically transform the world. The three elements in his equation, subject, God and art form a triangle that will have a powerful magical effect. (8)

We can read the letters that Emma Hauck 1878-1928 wrote from the mental hospital in Weisloch in 1909 to her husband in these terms. The letters are all the more poignant because they remained in the hospital archives. In *Letter to my husband* Hauck has formed the words into columns that cover the whole page resembling landscape. In *Herzensschatzkomm* (sweetheart come) the two words are repeated in peaks or crescendos whereas *Komm* is like a piece of woven cloth. Here repetition functions as a mechanical gesture or a closed circuit but there is a sense of impotence in Hauck's incantations as the reply she desires cannot be given.

It is clear that art performs an important function for the psychotic patient whether s/he has previously been an artist or not. For Antonin Artaud 1896-1948 it initially helped him stave off the psychotic break. Artaud designed plays which were emotionally invasive to his audiences and in whom he sustained a constant state of uncertainty. Music and lighting and sound were used to seduce sensations, sometimes even replacing speech. Every nuance, even the breathing of the actors was choreographed to create maximum impact on

the audience. In an attempt to get away from the psychological aspect of his characters he invented a new '*bodily*' language for the stage that did away with '*written poetry*' and was based on '*gestures, postures and air-born cries*'. (9) In his *Theatre of Cruelty* the aim was to unbalance the audience/ performer dynamic. Artaud's inability to tolerate a limitless infinity or void led him to objectify this in his art. He achieved this by drawing the audience into the vortex of the action where he brought to bear a multiplicity of elements with the aim of completely overwhelming them. His art initially forestalled the disruption that pertains to psychosis in a way that was a completely unique. Lacan was to call this *le sinthome*, an organisation of enjoyment/suffering that is beyond psychoanalysis, the enigmatic core of creativity that all individuals need to realise. (10)

To conclude, as language speaks through the psychotic ceaselessly and with a certainty that makes metaphor redundant, words *are* things in this structure. Some psychotic artists use art as a means to magically correct reality, others like Wolfler paint to maintain their existence or like Artaud make a new linguistic structure. For Freud, beauty arises out of the sublimation of sexual desires as art. For Lacan, it is necessary for art to engage with death to produce beauty implying a response to a great danger. Either way it speaks of things that resist the symbolic, procreation and death. For the psychotic, insofar as these are literalised there is no acknowledgement of loss and all new experience is distorted into a delusional metaphor. In the realm of creativity the psychotic is employed by the divine Other to express 'divine truths'. In contrast, the artist invites the spectator to share his lack and to mutually sustain a renunciation (4)

The artist is, as Pinsky tells us in his poem, compelled to make a response which s/he does in relation to the Other in the language into which s/he is born and with which s/he creates. Language which signifies an approximation for the truth as it is lived but which can be symbolically understood and which demands a reply. The psychotic artist has another story to tell which is of h/er relation to the unique Other which by definition cannot be shared.

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