



art & psychoanalysis



MARIA WALSH

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Maria Walsh

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Art and Psychoanalysis

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This book is dedicated to my parents.

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Introduction

Any relationship changes the elements brought into relation. The relationship between art and psychoanalysis is no exception. In any relationship, the balance of power is always precarious; the conjoining of two different disciplines means that the attention paid to each one is constrained and unequal, but, on the other hand, the encounter between the two produces sparks of illumination and connection that would otherwise remain dormant. This book is written from the point of view of art and art criticism rather than psychoanalysis. My choice of psychoanalytic theories and concepts is determined by their use for thinking about art. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint there will be many gaps and omissions, but I do not feel guilty about this, as there are numerous introductions to psychoanalysis as well as the indispensable *Pelican Freud Library* which cover this terrain. On the other hand, artists may find that there is too much attention paid to the elaboration of psychoanalytic theory and not enough paid to the works of art that I shall bring into alignment with it. But there is something valuable to be gained on the rocky terrain of this interrelationship, to which the numerous encounters between art and psychoanalysis over the twentieth century testify.

While psychoanalysis, as derived from Freud and his followers, has found many detractors in the popular press and media, it has been and continues to be a source of inspiration for artists. Derided as being unscientific at best, the purely sexual fantasies of Viennese petit bourgeois turn-of-the-century society at worst, psychoanalysis, as a thematic body of ideas, has prevailed as an invaluable resource for thinking about art in the twentieth and on into the twenty-first centuries. Not only have artists dipped in and out of psychoanalytic theories as inspiration for their work – in the case of American artist Mary Kelly, going so

far as to critique these theories in her artwork – but, more uncannily, artists who profess to know nothing of their tenets or to be completely uninterested in them, have produced work whose thematics align so closely with psychoanalytic ideas that they could be said to be inseparable. One simple reason for this is that both art and psychoanalysis have a relationship to the unconscious and, while the unconscious means different things to artists and psychoanalysts, for both it is associated with mental processes that are not fully known by or under the control of the conscious mind.

The discourse of the unconscious predates Freud. The notion of unconscious ideas was broached by the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and in the nineteenth century the concept emerged in varying ways in the psychology of Johann Friedrich Herbart and Eduard von Hartmann and the theories of physiologist Hermann von Helmholtz, all of whom Freud was aware of. But it was Freud who formalised the notion of the unconscious as a psychic mechanism whose workings were made apparent in dreams, slips of the tongue and forgetting. These operations are considered irrational from the perspective of objective reason, but Freud showed that they had their own logic bound up with the expression of repressed wishes and desires. In formalising the unconscious in this way, Freud severed its links to Romantic inspiration and brought this area of psychic functioning into the realm of everyday behaviour. Although the Romantic view still exists that art stems from the eruptions of a magical, inspirational unconscious, the idea that this terrain can be mapped and brought to conscious scrutiny has been of interest to contemporary art, at least since Surrealism, the art movement with which we commonly associate psychoanalysis and the ideas of Freud.

This book will begin by exploring the shift in the relationship between art and psychoanalysis from a Surrealist engagement with psychoanalytic imagery to the more contemporary critical engagement by artists, art critics and historians that emphasises how psychoanalytic concepts such as fetishism, narcissism, abjection, etc., rather than being used as illustrational sources for art, can be used as tools to think about how meaning operates in the cultural reception of an artwork rather than an individual artist's psyche. One of the key terms in the relationship between art and psychoanalysis that this book will revolve around is the term 'object'. There are psychoanalytic objects and there are art objects, all with varying degrees of materiality. Generally speaking, in both art and psychoanalysis the relationship between materiality – either actual materials and/or techniques and behavioural effects – and the intangible nature of the ideas and emotions that can be attached to them do not exist in a causal relation to one another. Here lies a common misunderstanding about what the relationship between art and psychoanalysis might be. In my experience of teaching art and psychoanalysis, I find that

art students are often attracted to psychoanalysis because they think that it will provide the key to their work, that it will translate its supposedly mute materiality into discourse. (This is also one of the reasons why many art students avoid psychoanalysis.) This misunderstanding is understandable given the pervasiveness of therapy culture in the media in which the reasons for behaviour are all too easily analysed on reality TV chat shows using psycho-pop journalese. Students are also required by an ever-quantifiable education system to account theoretically for their work, and this can lead them to have undue expectations of what psychoanalytic theory might offer. However, what we find in psychoanalysis is not a readymade interpretation or rationale for why artists make the things they do, but rather a cultural discourse about operations of the mind in which the relation between cause and effect is skewed, indirect and circuitous to such an extent that the authority of discourse is undermined. The material affects of psychoanalytic thinking – anxiety, paranoia, fear, obsession, etc. – cannot be definitively traced back to a point of origin, because as we shall see in Chapter 1 of this book, on Freud's dream-work, unconscious psychic processes make use of 'representatives' to express repressed or negated ideas, and these 'representatives', while linked to causes, are also different from them due to the 'work' of distortion that occurs in attaching mental ideas to material representations. Something similar occurs in the process of making art.

While a traditional critic may attempt to translate imagery back to an initial idea, this is bound to fail due to the material 'work' that has been effected by the artist as well as the cultural and historical context of art itself. The best we can do is to make suggestions, create alignments, and seek connections between images and meanings, but a one-to-one correspondence is not possible due to the distinct economies of sensations and words or pictorial and material representations. From the 'stories' told to them in the clinic, psychoanalysts enable their patients to create equivalent narratives for events that may or may not have occurred in a time and space different from the present. These equivalent narratives are not true pieces of evidence and they circulate in psychoanalytic theory in relation to particular conceptual and fantasmatic 'objects' – the transitional object (D.W. Winnicott), the *petit objet a* (Jacques Lacan), internal objects (Freud, Melanie Klein) and abject objects (Julia Kristeva). These 'objects' are structures that account for the expression of material affects and desires. They can account for impulses and forces in art, but do not translate the meaning of pictorial and spatial representations into another language. Rather than a means of interpreting art, which would be to ascribe a hierarchy in the relationship, psychoanalysis interrelates with art in much more dynamic ways.

This book will elaborate on the affinities and divergences between art and psychoanalysis in relation to their particular objects and theories. It will focus on artists who have either

directly invoked psychoanalysis in their work or whose work is suggestive of a relation with or has been written about using psychoanalytic theory. It will take its main impetus from the theories of Freud, which, as Richard Wollheim states, are strictly speaking psychoanalysis proper.¹ Although I shall look at some of Freud's followers, such as Melanie Klein, and more recent psychoanalysts such as Julia Kristeva and Jacques Lacan, my choice of psychoanalysts and their ideas will be determined by their popularity in mainstream art discourse, my goal being to show how psychoanalysis has been and continues to be a productive thematic in contemporary art, as well as to introduce a range of psychoanalytic concepts to readers who may be vaguely aware of them. A subsidiary strand running throughout the book will argue that art, while linked to the perversions of fetishism and masochism, is essentially different from them in deliberately provoking ambiguity and uncertainty while the perversions seek to stabilise identity.² Implicit in my narrative will be the importance of the destabilising force of the Freudian death drive to an ethics of art in which intersubjective relations between subjects and objects are reconfigured as fragmented, partial and provisional entities rather than art being on the side of the maintenance of the (illusory) authority of the ego. The book's trajectory shall move progressively through stages of authority, destabilisation and healing, intermixtures of all three occurring throughout the book, with the emphasis being on the middle stage, as intrinsic to psychoanalytic thinking is the awareness and acknowledgement of the fact that we are not masters of our own house.

Chapter 1 will address the dynamics of the dream-work and will focus on the complexity of translation from unconscious to conscious rather than on dream symbolism. This will be the most historical chapter, referring to nineteenth-century Symbolist painter Odilon Redon, whose work predates Freud but exemplifies the structural interplay between meaning and non-sense offered by the dream-work as a model of symbolic distortion. In this chapter, I will also look at how psychoanalytic ideas operate as readymade narratives that are used to elaborate psychic fantasies in the work of Surrealist Max Ernst in particular. While for Freud the dream-work operated on an individual idiosyncratic basis, artist Susan Hiller, whose work is productively critical of the Freudian legacy, explores the collective ritual of this process which testifies to the more social aspect of the phenomenon as a source of creative inspiration.

The fact that we are not masters of our own house will be explored in Chapter 2, which focuses on the uncanny and the psychic disturbances that stem from the motif of the home as a site of protection and a source of repression. Over the course of her life's work, Louise Bourgeois returned again and again to the theme of the house as the progenitor of fear and anxiety. The trope of Freud's 'familiar unfamiliar', mapped onto the female body and the house, has also been explored in the work of Robert Gober, as well as Rachel Whiteread and Gregor Schneider.

Anxiety is one of the earliest of human emotions, and we erect various defence mechanisms to ward it off. One such mechanism, the fetish object, defends against but paradoxically also incites more anxiety, and in Chapter 3 I shall attempt to find a way out of this double bind looking at work by artists in which the fetish object is transformed into a much more playful exchange of objects, using disguise and knowing humour. This will entail looking at the work of artist Hans Bellmer, which is often referred to with as misogynistic, the social nature of art as a fetish in commodity fetishism in the work of 1980s postmodern artists such as Jeff Koons, and then shifting to the critique of the masculine subject that underlies the concept of fetishism in both Freud and Marx by female artists using strategies of masquerade.

The concept of narcissism is, according to Freud, key to the work of art. Chapter 4 will take the work of artist Mary Kelly both to explore and critique this concept, particularly in relation to the feminine. I will suggest that there is a particular form of feminine narcissism which centres on multiplicity and doubling rather than deathly repetition, proposing this form of masquerade as a challenge to Freudian ideas about female desire. I shall explore this potential and its pitfalls further in relation to the double-edged address of the work of artist Jemima Stehli. Chapter 5 will expand on the theme of narcissism, showing how it is linked to the ego's structuring of the field of perspectival vision and how Jacques Lacan's notion of the gaze can be used to unseat this visual mastery. The popularity of Lacan's ideas in art discourse related to his emphasis on the ideological parameters of the psyche and its linguistic structure. His focus on the linguistic signifiers of desire and representation as a mediating system in which we always already partake was aligned with appropriation art in the 1980s and early 1990s. Artists such as Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Robert Longo, and Richard Prince, to name but a few, made artworks deploying images and texts from the media, but configuring them in critical montages that attempted to analyse their seductive pervasiveness. As a reaction to this type of art, in the 1990s there was a return to the body in art and more of an appreciation of a direct relation to visceral materials. A key exhibition is the 1993 Whitney exhibition 'Abject Art: Desire and Repulsion in American Art', which included artists such as Mike Kelley, Cindy Sherman, Yayoi Kusama, Robert Mapplethorpe, Kiki Smith, Louise Bourgeois and Andres Serrano. These artists explore bodily boundaries in terms of social taboo and transgression, and Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic ideas of abjection were key to the reception of this kind of work, as well as generating a renewed interest in the work of Bourgeois, whose work spans the twentieth century and is a good indication of how trends in critical theories such as psychoanalysis fall out of and come back into fashion.

The concept of the abject explored in Chapter 6 forms a watershed in the book between the forms of narcissism addressed in Chapters 4 and 5 and what cultural critic Stuart Hall

called 'black narcissus' in Chapter 7. The black body was rendered abject, both invisible and relegated to the margins, and all too visible and considered disgusting by the white imaginary, therefore narcissism had a political value in the work of black artists in the 1990s. These four chapters, Chapters 4 and 5 on the formation and critique of narcissism, Chapter 6 on its deformation in abjection, and Chapter 7 on its reformation in the work of black artists, form a pattern that oscillates between, on the one hand positing the ego, and on the other hand shattering its co-ordinates, which prepares for the focus in Chapter 8 on repetition compulsion and the death drive. Here too there is a shift back in time from the 1990s to the 1970s and the work of post-minimalist sculptors Eva Hesse and Robert Smithson, the entropic and cyclical forcefields of whose artworks resonate tellingly in the present.

In Chapter 9, the book returns from the 1970s to recent discussions on art and psychoanalysis in the 1990s which rescued Melanie Klein's theories for contemporary art, focusing on sadistic aggression rather than the linguistic bent of Lacanian theory. Rather than mediation and representation, the pre-linguistic aggressions of Kleinian theories lead us towards the idea that art can be reparative and healing. However, even here, my argument that art is always bound up with some form of destabilisation continues, and the final two chapters, one on D.W. Winnicott's transitional object, the other on Didier Anzieu's concept of the ego skin, oscillate between the poles of healing and rupturing, my use of artists such as Marina Abramović and Lygia Clark enabling the discussion of the destabilising force of the death drive to be seen in socially productive terms as affecting change. The final chapter on Anzieu speculates on the idea of art as both a restorative gesture and as an augmentation of trauma, with the latter being necessary to the former.

Artist Louise Bourgeois says that there is no cure for the artist, that any therapeutic aspect of art-making is overridden by the repetition of traumatic experience it entails. Psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva says that the artist 'is able to find a temporary harmony in his state of malaise', and she sees art as ultimately cathartic.³ This may be the difference between an artist and a psychoanalyst, and in this book I ultimately argue that, while the working through of traumatic experience may well repeat pain, there is pleasure to be gained in the structured or formalised fragmentation of the ego, which serves culture by converting the sadistic impulses of the ego, whose defence mechanisms are domination and appropriation of the external world and whose actions tend towards war, into a masochistic ethics of responsibility and desire. In this I shall be departing somewhat from Freud, for whom the pleasurable pain of primary masochism is outweighed by the danger it holds for the psyche of internal destruction.⁴ However, the gist of my argument will be that the artist, rather than taking him- or herself as an object to be destroyed,⁵ finds a surrogate 'object' to

channel the potentially dangerous defusion of the instincts involved in primary masochism so that the fragmentation they incur is experienced at a distance, although, paradoxically, an extremely intimate one. The ethics involved here is that the excess of destructiveness that seems to be inherent in human sexuality is dissipated via an internal relation to a surrogate self rather than projected outwards and inflicted on an external object in the exercise of 'mastery or the will to power'.⁶ The formalisation of destruction in the art encounter allows us to repeat the painful pleasures of what theorist Leo Bersani calls an 'ecstatically shattered ego', which is a repetition of the originary 'threat of stability and integrity of the self that human sexuality is'.⁷ Needless to say, this is very different to conservative trends in art that view it as a civilising form of transcendence over the human condition as well as to sado-masochistic practices, which, by contrast, organise the unbound energy of the 'ecstatically shattered ego' into a series of contractual relations, rather than allowing for the mobility and indeterminate sensuality of desire.