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THE ELEGANT ADAPTATION: ON CREATIVITY IN PSYCHOANALYSIS AND ART

An Interview with Danielle Knafo, PhD

Spyros D. Orfanos, PhD, ABPP

Spyros D. Orfanos: I am so happy to have this opportunity to speak with you, because I find your body of work amazing. You've done a tremendous amount of work in the area of creativity: You have written four books and dozens of articles, and you have taught and lectured on the subject. I'd like to ask you about a few other areas besides the study of creativity, because you've so elegantly integrated the creative and the clinical. But let me begin by asking you some background questions, and then we'll get into the actual work you've done. You're a psychologist and a psychoanalyst and also an art critic?

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Danielle Knafo: Yes.

SDO: And you write a tremendous amount about creativity and you study creativity. How do you find the integration of all that for yourself?

DK: The wearing of different hats? I've been an immigrant a few times, so I grew up with one foot in one culture and the other foot in another culture. I've become accustomed to moving fluidly from one world to another. That's how I move between the worlds of psychoanalysis and art. I think my experiences as an immigrant established a blueprint for my comfort on trains or in between places, in transit, neither here nor there, or both here and there, and so interdisciplinary work suits me well. I'm interested in all of the arts; I've dabbled in all of the arts myself.

SDO: So you painted?

DK: I painted, I danced, I was a musician, I write—so I like bringing worlds together, having dialogues among different areas and also different parts of myself.

SDO: I would imagine that there's a lot of creativity, but there must also be some darker sides to all that too.

DK: The dark side has to do with being an outsider, never completely feeling at home, never feeling that I'm part of the mainstream. Yet I've tried to use that to my advantage, as I mentioned before. I've transformed that place of difference and of being an outsider into a creative place. Many of the most creative people are exiles, refugees, and immigrants.

SDO: People who live on the margin.

DK: Yes, or people who belong to ethnic minorities. Even Freud said very early in his *Autobiographical Study* that anti-Semitism freed him. He already knew he wasn't going to be accepted by the mainstream, and so it liberated his thinking, allowing him to come up with novel, and even unpopular, ideas. There's a freedom to being on the outside.

SDO: Well, it does provide a certain perspective. I know that Eric Erikson talked about the fact that being an immigrant had an impact on the development of his theories and his psychosocial stages, or at least he wondered if that was the case. Now where were you born?

DK: French Morocco. My first language was French.

SDO: So that's a long road to get from Morocco to the U.S.

DK: I am a Sephardic Jew born in French-occupied Morocco, and I grew up in Pennsylvania Dutch Country. You can't find two more dif-





ferent cultures. I had to be creative to make that combination work. And you know that an important aspect of creativity has to do with seeing connections among things that, on face value, seem unrelated. I also lived in Israel for many years. I took my BA and master's in Israel.

SDO: And you got your PhD at the City University of New York. In art?

DK: I have a degree in English literature, and also in psychology.

SDO: What language do you dream in?

DK: I dream in different languages. It depends which language I'm speaking mostly at the time. It infiltrates the dreams. Also, sometimes when I am a child in my dreams, the dream is in French.

SDO: Fascinating. Do you feel that dreams are creative?

DK: That's a very good question. My answer is yes and no. Many psychoanalysts compare creativity to the dream. And I think it's a mistake to do that, because creativity is done when one is conscious and has a will to produce, to create. The dream is created in a different state of consciousness. Yet, the two endeavors do have some important elements in common—imagery, symbolism, condensation, displacement, regression—and we can learn about creativity from the creativity of the unconscious. So I think there are similarities, but there are also very important differences that need to be kept in mind.

SDO: There are so many ways to define creativity. What is your preferred definition?

DK: There are different definitions and many different kinds of creativity. I think in general that when we think of creativity we think of something new, something fresh, something with an original perspective, being able to see something with a new eye. It involves bringing things together or taking them apart in a new way, reformulating questions, sniffing out novel connections, taking leaps of imagination that place the mind in a new territory. It involves bracketing what one feels sure of in order to see what then appears. I am reminded of a quote by Picasso, who said, when he was elderly, that it took him 90 years to learn how to draw like a child. That captures so much about how we lose something with age that is naturally creative in us. All you have to do is enter a kindergarten class to see such wonderful, imaginative works of art made by children who look at the world with awe and a sense of wonder, freshness, and curiosity.

SDO: That love affair with the world.

DK: Exactly. But what happens is that many of us lose that ability, that





vision, and in fact there have been studies from cognitive psychology, Gestalt psychology, and developmental psychology, all of which find that at about eight years old, the creative spirit begins to wane and there's a lot of speculation as to why that is.

SDO: It's a cross-cultural finding too.

DK: And it's cross-cultural, and why is that? The Freudians say the child enters latency, and the libidinalization of the world goes underground. The cognitive psychologists say children pay greater attention to reality at this point; they develop the capacity for abstract thought, and attention to detail increases. Suddenly things shift, and children who previously drew an elephant with a circle now need to add a trunk and four legs. External reality becomes very important. Anton Ehrenzweig beautifully described this shift. He combined Gestalt and psychoanalytic views in his understanding of creativity. He spoke of "the hidden order of art" that children grasp naturally but that adults lose. Artists are exceptions to this, which explains why they are often compared to children at play.

SDO: One of my favorite pieces of developmental research says that around the age of eight there's a discovery of death and shortly after that there is the discovery of God. I wonder if something monumental happens around that age of eight.

DK: I never heard that children discover God at eight. If true, I would think that would make people more creative, because I believe, like Otto Rank, that art represents a major way people attempt to transcend their finiteness—using their art as a kind of immortality formula. In my paper on creativity and addiction, I mention how the theories of Melanie Klein and Winnicott link depression, with its accent on mourning, to the capacity for symbolization. Perhaps not everyone knows that the word "symbol" derives from the Greek *symbolein*, which means to reunite. I think of symbolization as the ability to ponder and realize what is absent. Through symbolization, we repair and reunite with whom and what has been lost to us. Klein's depressive perspective, by definition, is one that embraces a particular and darker view of the human condition and one that doesn't shy away from experiencing guilt, loss, and the inevitability and finality of death. Such depressive and terror-driven experiences have the potential to act as a bittersweet muse to the creative process.

SDO: You mentioned different kinds of creativity. Could you say some-





thing about that? What kinds of creativity do you mean?

DK: Well, one can be creative in so many different ways. You know, there's the creativity of everyday life. There's the creativity that one brings to one's work. There's creativity in relationships. There's the creativity of art, of creating works of art. There's the creativity of theories. I'm writing now about the creativity of theory building; it's very daunting. So there are so many different ways of being creative. I remember one time I was in Paris watching a man lighting street lamps, and there was something about the way he was doing it that made me think of it as an art form. Even the simplest tasks can be taken beyond the realm of the ordinary into that of art. In a way, the Dada art movement tried to show precisely this; that anything can be regarded as art—think of Duchamp's urinal.

SDO: Tell me a little bit about how you got interested in actually studying creativity. You did your doctoral studies in clinical psychology at City University, an important school. Did you work on creativity?

DK: I did. I went there knowing that I wanted to write my dissertation on the arts. It was a big sacrifice for me to not become an artist. I had to make a decision at one point whether I was going to follow the art route or the psychology route, and I decided on the latter, but I wanted to have my cake and eat it too, and so I've kept one foot in the art world. It was my compromise to allow myself to still be involved in the arts. I knew all along that I would combine these two areas that fascinate me, and I think my study of each one has enhanced the other. There's a cross-fertilization.

SDO: It certainly comes across in your writings. It's refreshing to read your writing, because there is a way that one domain informs the other. Where did you do your psychoanalytic training?

DK: At the New York University Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis [NYU Postdoc].

SDO: Did you have any particular teachers, mentors, or supervisors either in your doctoral training or at NYU Postdoc who particularly had an inspiring influence on you or acted as muses in some way or helped you develop?

DK: In my doctoral training I had the good fortune of studying with Gilbert Voyat, a Swiss psychologist who had studied with Piaget and also with major Jungians. He was a Renaissance man who had a multitude of interests, and he immediately took me under his wing. If he was



combining Piaget and Jung, then he certainly could allow my combination of psychoanalysis and art. Sadly, he died while our relationship was developing and before I finished my dissertation. For me it was a personal as well as a professional loss.

SDO: Your mentioning Piaget reminds me that he once said that to understand is to invent. Isn't that interesting?

DK: Yes, because Piaget saw the activity necessary in adapting to life. One must be active, involved, and engaged. This is the path to creativity.

SDO: Regarding your analytic training?

DK: Donald Kaplan was my mentor. He was also very interested in art. But it's more about the creative way he taught and supervised. I learned a lot from him about how to bring humor and creativity to the study of Freud. I was also greatly inspired and influenced by the writings of other analysts. Besides Freud, people like Winnicott, Eigen, and Bion—original thinkers and writers, unafraid to go against the grain and to mix disciplines. Otto Rank is another unsung hero of mine. He was a brilliant and creative thinker who knew a lot about art and the creative process, and death.

SDO: Your first book was on...

DK: Egon Schiele.

SDO: Tell us a little bit about that, because it's very interesting how you came to choose that particular artist.

DK: I wrote my doctoral dissertation on him, then turned it into a book.

SDO: *A Self in Creation* is the subtitle.

DK: Initially I wanted to write about 10 artists who painted self-portraits, because I thought self-portraiture is the most personal of art forms and therefore a perfect subject for a psychological analysis. I was told to choose one artist, not 10, and so I chose Egon Schiele. My fourth book focused on 10 self-representational women artists, so I eventually did get there. Schiele interested me because I was impressed by his enormous talent, yet I also couldn't help notice how his work bespoke his personal crisis and his attempts to resolve it. I also learned that his struggles curiously mirrored those of the time and place he lived: fin de siècle Vienna. I wanted to show how his psyche and his art informed each other. He created over a hundred self-portraits during his brief lifetime, and I studied the evolution of the self-portrait in his oeuvre. This was my first study demonstrating the therapeutic function of art.



SDO: He also did portraits of his mother, right?

DK: He did portraits of his mother; and he did landscapes and cityscapes too. I wrote about the portraits of his mother. Interestingly, many of them resemble him, and most of them depict her as either dead or blind, because that is the way he experienced her.

SDO: What's your take on this business about creativity and madness, creativity and pathology?

DK: Are you asking if I believe that artists are mad? I think that the drive to create art is often fueled by a combination of sensitivity to personal and existential issues and a background difficulty. Not always, but often. I've met and know many artists. I taught a course on psychology of art where I invited artists to come in and present their lives and their work; I've interviewed over a hundred artists. I've had many artists in my practice. And I have many artist friends. Many of them do have great pain in their background. Many of them have suffered trauma and are exquisitely sensitive people. I do think that a lot of creativity involves making sense of what happened, altering it in some way, appropriating it with the aim of transforming it—becoming its author rather than its victim.

SDO: You mentioned trauma, and you've written about the transformation of trauma. How do you see creativity in the service of that?

DK: Trauma can paralyze people, render them utterly helpless. Responding to trauma by making something meaningful and important out of it, by altering it and placing it in a new context, by defying it and refusing to be destroyed by it is one of the bravest and most liberating actions a human being can take. Art as a response to trauma can move one out of victimhood. I think the creative transformations of trauma are among the most inspiring examples that we have of the resilience of the human spirit. When I see people who've been traumatized and who can create something from that trauma that helps them not only to cope with their personal trauma but to communicate with others who have, and even those who have not, undergone a similar trauma, I am deeply moved.

SDO: Are you talking about patients or are you talking about artists now?

DK: Both and more! Whoever is traumatized, artist or not. Even when I work with people who are not artists and have been traumatized, I sometimes try to get them to write or draw their experience. It doesn't





have to be a work of art, but it helps to be able to use some kind of symbolic language.

SDO: Some self-expression?

DK: Some expression, some language—whether it's graphic language or dance language or words. Because trauma is often not processed the same way other experiences are. It does not have the same symbolic channels that our other experiences have when they are converted to memories. So to transform trauma into some kind of processing is really an accomplishment, and many artists are able to do this and that's one of the things I enjoy about writing about artists. Sometimes people ask me how I choose the artists I write about—for example, my most recent book about 10 women artists. How did I choose these women? One thing is that they all use their bodies in their art, and this is critical, because the book is on self-representational art. The second reason is that I admire them all, and I felt I could learn from them by studying their lives and their art. Many of them suffered from intense trauma. What I've learned is that each one persisted in working through her difficulties by creating artwork of a very particular and self-referential kind.

SDO: That reminds me about the distinction between making art as opposed to self-expression. The book, by the way, is titled *In Her Own Image: Women's Self-Representation in Twentieth-Century Art*, and it came out in September 2009. Congratulations.

DK: Thanks.

SDO: Given that you alluded to this, there are two artists I'm going to ask you about in a moment, but first, in addition to writing about creativity and writing about clinical issues, you spent a lot of time trying to deal with issues of gender and culture. Why does that feel particularly important to you?

DK: Well, culture is easy, because I come from a different culture and so I've always been very aware of the impact of culture on a person and certainly on art and communication. Gender...

SDO: Well, the last book is all women.

DK: The artists are women, but they are importantly responding to men, especially the ways men had portrayed women in art for the hundreds of years prior. My first book was on Schiele, a male artist, who painted a lot of self-portraits. After I finished that book, I wondered whether similar dynamics took place in a female artist who painted self-portraits. So I decided to write about Frida Kahlo. That led to another





and another, until it became a book of its own. I was also very interested in how women relate to their bodies.

SDO: Yes, I think you spent a lot of time making reference to that, both from a psychoanalytic and also from the art-critical perspective. There are many formidable women artists in your book. One who's really quite different than Frida Kahlo is Cindy Sherman, obviously in a more postmodern way, although Frida Kahlo had her postmodern moments. I mean she was amazingly ahead of her time in a certain kind of way. But both women used their bodies, both women addressed different kinds of trauma, right?

DK: Well, I don't know about Cindy Sherman, because she's the artist in the book I knew the least about. She didn't allow me to interview her. Some of the artists I interviewed, and so I had a lot of biographical information on them. For Cindy Sherman, I had very little. So I approached that chapter differently than the others. Rather than tie her art to biography, I wrote about the function and meaning of play in her work. I showed the evolution of her work and how the play changed over time. With Frida, I had a lot of historical background—letters, diaries—which informed my analysis of her life and art.

SDO: For Frida Kahlo, there were the obvious traumas to her body. Right? The accidents, the birthing traumas, and the miscarriages. Quite powerful and chilling.

DK: Yes, but other people wrote about those traumas. Most people who wrote on Frida Kahlo spoke about her work as a compensation for the terrible physical injuries that she endured, and I agree with that. But I added a psychoanalytic perspective to her work. Even before her accident, which took place at age 18, there were factors in her early childhood that predisposed her to this kind of art form. She was neglected by her mother, who was very histrionic. She was the last of six daughters; she was the baby of the family. She was raised by her older sisters, and she was suckled by an Indian wet nurse rather than her mother. And so there was a hunger—mirror hunger—from early on. So the consequences of the accident simply reinforced something that was already there.

SDO: Now did that experience, as far as you can tell, ultimately interact with her relationship with Diego Rivera and the kinds of complex, almost sadomasochistic, aspects of it, or am I reaching too far?

DK: Did her early experience have an influence on her relationship with



Rivera? Yes, yes.

SDO: And then how did that circle back to her art?

DK: Well, it certainly circled back to her art, because her art became her mirror. She not only surrounded herself with mirrors; she transformed her art into a mirror, painting her image over and over again, mirroring herself and having her viewers mirror her incessantly. She lamented the fact that she could only paint her own image. Most of her work, the large majority of her work, is self-portraiture, and, as a result, she felt very self-centered. She was a Communist, and she wanted greater ideals to be represented in her art, and here she was painting herself again and again.

SDO: Although very differently.

DK: Some are different, yet many show the same handsome, masklike face expressing a stoic determinism. Picasso said that nobody painted a portrait like Frida Kahlo.

SDO: Not a bad critic, Picasso.

DK: Not a bad critic. It did circle back to her relationship with Diego, because he became her mirror as well, and what he thought of her became very important to her. He was a great supporter of her art. Towards the end of her life, when he was roaming—he was a womanizer and he cheated on her a lot—she didn't want to lose him, and so she turned the tables and she became maternal towards him. Something in her changed just to keep him; she became the more maternal one, even though she was becoming weaker physically and needy in her own way. She made self-portraits in which her face is joined with his; she painted self-portraits in which his image appears on her forehead, literally showing how much he was on her mind. They had a great love, despite its storms.

SDO: How did you approach the idea of play with Cindy Sherman? Obviously some of her work seems playful, but there's also something a little eerie about it at times, a little postmodern and not necessarily in a playful way.

DK: Well, play is not always fun. Play can be very serious business. Think of children's games. They play dead, they play statues, they play all kinds of games, some of them quite strange and even mean. Cindy Sherman dressed up, she masqueraded; she played at being a woman. Her play posed questions along the lines of what it means to be a woman and what it means to *play* at being a woman. And it began with





her taking on feminine roles from 1950 film noir movies. Then her self-portrait photographs incorporated fairy-tale imagery. They became more grotesque, because we know that fairy tales are filled with violence and evil. [Bruno] Bettelheim knew that well in his book *Uses of Enchantment*. After that, she produced a series of “History Portraits” in which she took on her artistic ancestors by imitating their portrait genres. This was the first time she dressed up as male subjects as well as females. I compared this period with children playing at being mommy and daddy or playing house. Later she fragmented her image and played with dolls that she took apart and rearranged in new ways. She played with the body, with sex, with gender. Finally, she dressed up as a clown and played with aging. And so her play became more grotesque, more risky, more dangerous, and more perverted—always presenting us with the dark complexity of what we consider fun.

SDO: A few years ago you wrote a wonderful article on Ernest Kris’s regression in the service of the ego. After reading that article I had the feeling that you were trying to rehabilitate Ernest Kris.

DK: Not him. [laughter]

SDO: His concept. The way I remember it, I’m thinking particularly now in terms of play and how does one regress. I think you try to take away some of the negative connotations to that, but you did hold on to the word “regression.” Tell me a little bit about what you think about the notion of regression in the service of the ego, and how you brought an object relations sensibility to it.

DK: One of the things I tried to do in that paper was to disabuse people of the negative connotations tied to regression. I think one of the main reasons that concept went out of vogue was because people associate regression with pathology and they don’t see its constructive possibilities. Winnicott is the exception. He wrote a beautiful paper on regression as a necessary part of treatment with severe psychopathology. The regressive return offers the opportunity for self-repair by working through an original trauma in a safe holding environment. I have always felt that there was something valuable to that term, because artists I’ve known were writing about going to old places, going to places where they were like children or where they would think like a child. That’s regression. Think of Picasso’s quote. Or, Bruno Schulz, a Polish writer whom I happen to be writing about now and who spoke openly about his art as a return to childhood. He said his goal was to “mature” into childhood.





Regression involves the loosening of boundaries and the freedom from categorical, analytical, logical, and pragmatic thinking, what Freud called secondary process thinking. Thinking returns to a more primary condition, one in which ontic play becomes possible and the imagination takes flight, opening the possibilities of new combinations, permutations, connections, dissections, and the fabulously disordered experience of finding the new object. The object relational part of that paper involved my trying to show how artists' regression to childhood and earlier modes of thinking, seeing, and experiencing the world involves their dialoguing with significant others from that time. Because of this, artistic creation, like psychoanalysis, can entail a working-out of early relationships. I demonstrate how the relationship to the art product is a type of object relationship. So, if we bring that object relationship spin to it, regression in the service of the ego shouldn't seem like such a pathological way of thinking about it.

SDO: Of course, by bringing that in, you do shift the idea of regression. But I think that there is still a hint of the romantic when we talk about regression in the service of the ego. I'm not sure about this, and I think it is a holdover from the Romantic Era when somebody says, Well, I want to play like a child or I want to draw like a child. Something about that feels a little too reductionist to me. I think one of the things that I appreciate so much about your work is that you keep trying to elaborate on some ideas that were sacred ideas at certain points in the history of psychoanalysis. You did it in the book *Unconscious Fantasies and the Relational World*, which you coauthored with Ken Feiner. There was a way that you two were trying not to limit the idea of unconscious fantasies.

DK: I'm an "and" person, not an "or" person. I am comfortable with disparate things coexisting.

SDO: Yes, and maybe that, in part, comes from your personal experience with more than one culture. To me that is a very contemporary relational approach. I think so much of what I appreciate about contemporary psychoanalytic thinking is its refusal to say this is Oedipal and this is pre-Oedipal and this is post-Oedipal. There's a way that we understand the fluidity, a way that we understand that there's a totality (à la Irwin Hoffman and Jean-Paul Sartre). Maybe that's what I mean when I chafe a little bit at the use of the word "regression," because it comes with such connotations of a polarized position. But you respect it, and I think the paper's brilliant and you do go beyond Kris. I get





the feeling you're formulating new ideas in the psychoanalytic study of creativity. There's a certain trajectory to your work. And yet, sometimes you're using old wine bottles. I don't know if that's fair.

DK: Well, I give credit to people who've influenced me. I think I tried to take what has been written to new places, but I'm very aware of who were my influences. Thinking builds upon thinking, and so, for example, with Kris, and Winnicott, I'm aware of their influence on me, but I try to take the work to a new level.

SDO: What's your sense of what artists think or feel or the way they perceive analysts?

DK: With suspicion, with a lot of suspicion. And sometimes, rightly so. But it is true that a lot of artists are afraid to enter therapy, and they're afraid because many of them have this idea that their problem, their pathology, is what feeds their creativity, and even though they may suffer from it, they're afraid that if you take it away from them they will no longer be creative. Consequently, the majority of times you will see artists in therapy is when they have a creative block. As long as they're creating, they feel that's their therapy, and in a way it's true. Once I confronted French multimedia artist Orlan about this. She underwent numerous plastic surgeries to transform herself into a work of art and a site for public debate. She claimed that because she felt no pain (due to the painkillers she was administered) that the process was not traumatic or emotional for her. I asked her about psychological pain. I asked her how she could claim such a thing when the changes in her face and body obviously demanded constant adaptation. She finally conceded by saying that her art is her symptom. In other words, she was saying that her art contains her pathology and heals it at the same time. Without her art, she would have felt the pain that her surgeries produced.

SDO: If you take the devils away, you also take away the angels.

DK: I don't entirely believe that. However, I have heard of cases in which analysts did not know how to work with creativity and were unhelpful and even damaging to their patients' creative process. Sometimes the therapist is too interested in the creative product or treats it like a dream or a symptom to be analyzed and picked apart. I've seen some artists for years during which we never discussed their art. As long as it is a conflict-free area, I leave it alone. One must respect the creative process and its mystery to keep alive inspiration. So you have to be very careful when you work with artists not to go bulldozing into the creative





realm. It can be fragile.

SDO: I find myself often thinking about creators and their intimate relationships. In a soon-to-be-published paper, you write about matters of solitude, and how a lot of artists are consumed by their work. I think you make reference to how they almost need to be consumed in order to work. Now, solitude doesn't mean an absence of relationships, either intrapsychic or interpersonal, right?

DK: Yes, I think that is a superficial dichotomy: solitude vs. relatedness. Certainly artists are always dealing with internal relationships: relationships to a potential audience, to a potential reader, to muses, to important others. So there are always relationships going on, even though the person may be alone the majority of the time.

SDO: What do you think psychoanalysts have gotten wrong about artists?

DK: Psychoanalysts who have written about art have too often pasted their knowledge onto the art product rather than learning from art and dialoguing with the artist. It has been too much of a one-person psychology. Instead, psychoanalyst and artist should be dialoguing, each learning from the other. That's far more interesting to me.

SDO: And what would be the nature of that dialogue?

DK: Psychoanalysts might show artists the unconscious sources of their creativity and levels of meaning in their art product. Once Faulkner was asked what his novels meant, and he answered, "I don't know. I only write them." Psychoanalysts can also illuminate the creative process and the relationship between the artist and his or her work. They can elucidate the aesthetic reaction: what draws people to artworks of a certain kind, what repels them, and why. Artists can teach psychoanalysts important things as well. Artists can show us new ways of seeing things and understanding life, experience, relationships. Artists can show us that there is more than one way to work through personal issues and trauma, more than one way to heal and to grow and to make meaning of life.

SDO: How would you describe the creative process for an artist?

DK: Having studied many artists, I've seen how different it can be. In general, there is a receptive period of incubation, of getting ideas, of formulating something, and that can take a day or it can take years.

SDO: And inspiration?

DK: Inspiration is absolutely a part of that. Images begin to form,





associations begin to flow. There is a loosening of one's boundaries during that time to allow these ideas to germinate and incubate into something that can be worked with and given shape.

SDO: Is that unconscious or conscious?

DK: I think it's both. One feeds the other. And then when the person is ready to actually make something, they have to change to a different mode. The first mode is more open and more fluid. The second mode is more like problem-solving, because it involves the translation of an idea into a form.

SDO: To evolve into something. It's hard work.

DK: It is work. I think there's a fluid interplay between these two states. In the first state, nothing is censored; everything is allowed to flow and connect. In the second state, the ideas and concepts and visions are subjected to internal critique. Again we see primary and secondary process here.

SDO: These loose stages—for the sake of conversation, let's call them stages or positions—they take place within the artist. What about the role of the outside community or the environment that the artist is in? What role does that play?

DK: It can play a positive or a negative role. I've seen artists whose families were very supportive of their becoming artists, and I've seen artists whose families were completely against it. Another aspect of environment is the artist's artistic environment, schools of art that have influenced him or her. It is important to figure out who the artist is reacting to—both positively and negatively—in the art world.

SDO: The zeitgeist.

DK: Right.

SDO: Donald Kuspit, whom you know and have worked with, writes about how sometimes psychoanalysts will interpret, for instance, some of Picasso's paintings based on his bad relationship with his sister or something like that and ignore the artist or the political climate.

DK: Yes, that happens a lot. This is a big problem with a lot of psychoanalytic writing on art, analysts paying little or no attention to the time the artist lived in or the style of art he or she is practicing. One needs to do one's homework when one writes about an artist and his or her works. Context is critical. When I write about a particular artist, I immerse myself first in the time he or she lived. I find out what was going on historically and culturally. I study the art that was being produced at that time





and place. I ask: Where does my artist fit in or not fit into that? Then I find out all I can about the artist's family life and childhood. I try to learn as much as I can about his or her biography. I live with her, walk and talk to her, and listen to what she has to tell me. It is a dialogue, and the learning goes both ways. Freud acknowledged that he learned from art; he knew that artists are often ahead of their time. In my latest book, I dialogued with 10 women artists who produced art based on themselves and their bodies over the last century. I tried to enlighten their work with my psychoanalytic insights, but I also brought to psychoanalysis what they can teach us about women's bodies, women's sexuality, women aging, women and beauty, women and illness.

SDO: You're implying it is a two-way process, a bidirectionality, even though the artist may not be alive. Have there been artists that you have pursued or studied that you decided not to write about? And if so, why?

DK: No, if I pursued them, I've written about them. I challenge myself.

When I wrote about David Lynch, I did not like his movie *Blue Velvet*.

SDO: Why didn't you like it?

DK: I found it weird and violent. I just didn't like it. It wasn't to my taste, but it left me intrigued, because it quickly became a cult classic and it developed a following. Somebody from the Columbia Institute asked me to write something on the darker passions at about that time. So I thought Lynch's oeuvre was a perfect example of the darker passions. I forced myself to watch *Blue Velvet* again and again, along with *Twin Peaks* and *The Elephant Man*. It was difficult for me. But in the process, I learned to appreciate what David Lynch's vision was and what he was doing. I noticed how much he used unconscious fantasy in his work and how much his audience was invited to share these fantasies. That was its appeal.

SDO: Was it a countertransferential reaction?

DK: Yes, just like a patient might come into your office and you may have an initial aversion or negative reaction, you don't necessarily turn them away. At least you shouldn't. Eigen wrote a brilliant paper on the unwanted patient. He said we can learn a lot about ourselves by taking on such patients, the least of which is to develop a tolerance and amusement for the darker passions.

SDO: You teach psychoanalysis, you also teach on the doctoral level and on the postdoctoral level, so you do a lot of teaching, but you're also a clinician. You see patients. Is the practice of psychoanalysis,





psychotherapy, an art form? Or is it a science?

DK: Well, here again I think of it as “and” rather than “or.” I’m thinking a lot about this question recently with my new book, *Dancing with the Unconscious: The Art of Psychoanalysis and the Psychoanalysis of Art*. The whole first section—the first five chapters—is about the art of psychoanalysis. For years, since I began my analytic training, I heard that psychoanalysis lies somewhere between art and science. But when I looked for articles on the art of psychoanalysis, I found very few. It’s just taken as a given. Yet if psychoanalysis is an art, how do we understand what is artistic about what we do? What is creative in what we do? And so I’m taking on this challenge in my forthcoming book. I’m trying to delineate some of the aspects and the elements of psychoanalysis that are artistic. When it works well, I think it definitely is an art form. In one of his Paris Lectures, Bion said that if an analyst didn’t consider him or herself an artist, then he or she was in the wrong profession. Even if psychoanalysis is creative—an art form—it doesn’t have to be, and it certainly isn’t that way all the time. Some analysts are very tied to technique, and they may be good technicians but not artists. It depends on the practitioner. It may also depend on the session. A session may be artistic in one moment but not necessarily over time. I went to see the Picasso show at the Met today. There are some wonderful works and others that fall a bit flat. Even Picasso, the greatest artist, didn’t always shine; he wasn’t always great, and the same applies to the work we do. We’re not always artists. There are moments when we dance, moments when the music of insight and change beat the air, and we’re playing off each other and with each other. And there are other moments where the work drags, and, just like in artistic creativity, there are periods of incubation that may last a while before the dance takes off.

SDO: Your new book is called *Dancing with the Unconscious*.

DK: Yes, when analysis does work, when it is an art, it’s like a dance. You move, I move, we move together—obviously there’s music there and we’re not thinking about the next step; it flows and it moves and we’re in the moment and we’re working off each other. It’s not easy putting these things into words. It’s so subtle.

SDO: Yes, yes, extremely subtle.

DK: Sometimes it’s the very subtle aspects of analysis that make it artistic. Working with silence, for example. When to leave something alone. It’s like an artist who needs to know when to finish a painting or a work





of art. Mark Rothko was once asked how he knew when a painting was finished, and he replied, "When I see myself in it." All art is self-representational in one way or another. All art is reflective of the self from which it derives.

SDO: Well, we've covered a lot of territory, and I hope that readers will go to the material that you've written, because there's such a richness to the work that you've done. But as we come to the end of this interview, is there something that we haven't covered, that you'd like to communicate or highlight in a certain way?

DK: Maybe some of the work about solitude that I've been writing about lately.

SDO: Do say a little bit about solitude, because I think that you're trying to provide a bit of a corrective.

DK: To Winnicott?

SDO: Yes, what do you think?

DK: Well, yes, a little bit. I'm also trying to enter this subject that isn't written about enough, and particularly today, with so much focus on relationality. I think there's not enough appreciation for the value of solitude. When one works with creative people, one has to appreciate what the function of solitude is for the creative process. Artists spend a lot of time alone in order to make art. Winnicott was one of the few who did value the capacity to be alone, as he considered it to be a developmental milestone. He believed that people with good enough mothering were able to be alone because they internalized the presence of a good object. I appreciate his attention to the merits of solitude, but I disagree with this view based on my experience with artists. In fact, many had lost mothers or fathers early in their lives, and yet they can tolerate being alone and create out of that aloneness. I think sometimes it's exactly the opposite of what Winnicott was saying. Artists often create a space that will give them a nurturing place in which to create, a space they never had before. That's where I'm making a corrective. And I'm also making a corrective by opposing the assumption that a clear dichotomy exists between solitude and relatedness.

SDO: Winnicott's original paper was titled "The Capacity to Be Alone," an ability that is a developmental paradox: the experience of being alone while someone else is present. When I think about relationality, I don't think just about the interpersonal. I think that relationality (a meta-theory) can and does include the intrapsychic. Hence, object relations





subsumes internal personifications or objects or these internal experiences. There is a fluid interpenetration of the interpersonal and the intrapsychic. One of the things that I love that you say in that paper is how art can function as a type of object relationship and can provide a site for transformation and change. Would you say something about that?

DK: I think the creative process and the work of art is one way a person can relate to his or her objects not just as external objects, but as embodied objects. Naturally, there is a relationship that ensues. Sometimes artists have difficulty getting rid of an artwork that they make and decide to keep these works for themselves. What is it about the art that they can or cannot sell? I think the works the artist keeps have the most relational valance. These are works/relationships they can't let go of or separate from. In terms of relationships, the audience plays a central role. For instance, one writes alone yet one is communicating for a reader. Paul Auster nicely portrayed the intersubjective interaction that takes place in what I call a "third space" that exists between writer and reader, or artist and audience, when he writes that every book is an image of solitude because it represents the outcome of a great deal of time spent alone in a room. Yet literature is both the product of an author's solitude *and* a means by which a reader reaches through his own and the author's solitude. In reading, an individual makes contact with another mind, the writer's mind. So it is possible to be alone and not alone at the same time. Thus writer and reader are both alone and together; this is the third space of creativity. In my paper I show how creative solitude is not necessarily an escape from the world but, rather, a different kind of participation in it.

SDO: Hanna Segal said that, and there's a way that you're communicating. That occurs most clearly, for me, having interviewed a number of composers and musicians. Do painters have something similar that they refer to? Communicating with an audience?

DK: Yes, there's always an audience, there's always somebody there, whether it's a muse, a reader, a critic, or a significant other. Creativity is not devoid of object relations, and that's why I think of it as a highly relational process.

SDO: In that paper you also referred to bad objects. Say a little bit about that.

DK: Here again is where I disagree with Winnicott. Sometimes artists create to engage the bad objects of their childhoods—Fairbairn's unpredictable yet exciting objects—with whom they have unfinished





business. Often it's the bad object that gets personified in the artwork and the bad object who has to be attacked and revisited again and again. Freud was on to the function of mastery in the repetition compulsion back in 1920, and he saw this at work in the arts. This particular aspect helps explain why creativity is such a wonderful venue for working through trauma and why artists endlessly repeat some themes in their work.

SDO: Can you say more about the dark side of creativity?

DK: That's such a good question. The dark side of creativity. The first thing that comes to mind is that creativity can be addictive, just like any substance, and it can have all of the deleterious effects on one that an addiction has. One can become a slave to the process, and it can substitute for living in the world. It can create avoidance of external relationships and practical affairs, and one can become quite depressed and even suicidal when it is not going well, when the "fix" is out of reach. Another dark side is what Winnicott and Adam Phillips noticed when they wrote about the ruthlessness that is frequently observed in creative individuals. Their art often comes first, and they can be extremely exploitative and uncompassionate in their relations with others, using others in the service of their art. A good example of this is Truman Capote, who alienated all his friends when they saw themselves written about in an unflattering way in his book *Answered Prayers*. Think too of an artist with a camera, standing alone and apart, documenting tragedy as more important than stepping in and helping out. I am thinking of Sally Mann, well known for having photographed her children growing up. Many of the photographs show them in seductive poses and in the nude. Where is the mother whose need is to protect her children's privacy and where is the artist who sees a good shot and wants to share it with the world? Artists can be liars and narcissistic. Read Picasso's biography to see how much damage one man caused in the lives of others. What else? In the book I am writing, I propose that creativity is something demanded by all of us in response to the darkness caused by our knowledge that we will all die, that everything is impermanent. That's a biggie. And, of course, there is creativity used in the service of evil. Think of Hitler. Here was a man who was rejected by the Vienna Academy of Art and became the greatest death dealer who ever lived. He created a death machine, a state dedicated to patently evil aims.

SDO: But let us not end this interview on that note.

DK: You're right. I'll finish by saying that creativity in the service of





life and art is an open-ended, ongoing process of discovery, revelation, and construction. It is one of our greatest and most elegant adaptations, residing at the very heart of human possibility. Everything made by human beings begins as an act of imagination, an adaptation not merely in the service of survival but of growth. It is not enough for us to merely survive. We must also thrive, and that's where human creativity comes in. And I believe that psychoanalysis at its best is a life-serving enterprise that can unlock the creative potential in ourselves and in others.

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