

About Certain Extraordinary Relations Between Artists and Their Works

by Mel Roman and Peter Stasny

Artists' relationships to their works are probably as diverse as their relationships to people. Painters, the subject of the present work, invariably have differing involvements with their creations. Picasso, for example, distinguished clearly between his private and his public works and prevented the release of many drawings, paintings, and sculptures until his death. He also had a highly idiosyncratic relationship to his portraits, particularly those of close friends. Other painters reveal the specialness of a particular work by spending many years on its creation and completion. Arshile Gorky, the well-known abstract expressionist, worked for more than 15 years on a series of paintings depicting himself and his deceased mother, taken from an old photograph. The German Dadaist Kurt Schwitters spent the entire second half of his life on the assemblage and construction of a complex structure known as the "Merzbau." This endeavor was interrupted only by the rise of National Socialism in Germany, which resulted in the painter fleeing. Wherever Schwitters settled in subsequent years, he began his "life-work" anew. He stated that "completion" of the Merzbau was inherently impossible since he thought of it as a perennial work.

Certainly it is not only 20th century painters who have exhibited peculiar and intense relationships to some of their works. Freud stressed this aspect in his study on Leonardo da Vinci. It is widely believed that Leonardo worked on the Mona Lisa, his most famous work, intermittently between 1503 and 1516.

For most painters these special relations do not exclude the parallel or subsequent creation of other works that are not as heavily catheted. Munch and Van Gogh might have been exceptions to this observation, since during highly tormented phases of their lives they developed intense relationships to all their paintings.

We propose that this extraordinary relationship to one or more works that are clearly distinguished from the rest of the oeuvre plays an essential dynamic role in the progression of many artists' lives. In this paper we shall examine the functional significance of such relations and speculate about onto- and phylogenetic etiologies. Our extensive study of the life and work of the German-born painter Jochen Seidel, who experienced psychotic decompensations, leading to suicide in 1971, revealed that Seidel perpetuated an intense and highly significant relationship to one of his paintings called the "photopainting." He began work on this canvas soon after the final separation from his wife and two young children. The photopainting was a large, rectangular canvas that usually leaned against the wall of his studio and was quite visible to visitors. This painting changed its appearance continuously, giving evidence of the artist's constant involvement. One day it could appear as a photorealistic collage of black and white prints out of a family album. A few days later a spectator might find that these images had been replaced by a dizzying vortex of color, a maelstrom containing barely recognizable fragments of Seidel's beloved family. Images of Seidel's closest relatives were clearly discernible during various stages of the paintings. Seidel described this process in his autobiographical notes: "The photopainting was the one thing that I held on to, when all others had failed." Seidel worked on this painting for over five years, interrupted only by hospitalizations. The process clearly had remedial qualities for the artist and enabled him not only to tolerate the desertion of his family but also to continue the artistic struggle in

which he confronted the innermost realms of his personality.

To gain further understanding of the determinants of this process, particularly of its integrating and strengthening aspects, we must investigate the nature of libidinal cathexes towards inanimate objects and creations in general. The importance of inanimate objects in normal and pathological development has been underscored by Mahler, Searles, and many others. The significance of inanimate objects as "transitional" was originally formulated by Winnicott and is still considered an important developmental feature for a significant proportion of children. Brody negates its compulsory presence but cites a number of studies based on direct observation that confirm Winnicott's ideas to a large extent. The transitional object is usually a blanket or a toy and is invariably chosen by the child from his immediate surroundings. It becomes impregnated with the child's and the mother's secretions and only as such can it serve as the "first not-me possession."

Through repeated maneuvers it helps the child to establish links between the subjective and objective worlds, aids disentanglement from the more symbiotic relationship with the mother, and soothes the child's separation anxiety at such particularly fraught times as falling asleep or witnessing mother's departure. This smudgy piece of cloth is thus endowed with rather extraordinary powers. Repetitive interaction between infant and transitional object must be capable of inducing a formidable state in the infant, able to appease the most primitive and powerful of fears, the fear of "not going on being" as it is induced by separations from mother, bodily injuries, and other attacks on the infant ego.

It seems useful to investigate by what mechanisms the child's first distinct relationship with an inanimate object can still these infant anxieties. These mechanisms might be analogous to the processes linking the artist to his special creations, provided that they too can be seen as responses to similar anxieties. Modell emphasized the role of perceived omnipotence through magical control as one possible mode of action. It appears that "magical thinking" alone has become insufficient to assure the infant's omnipotence. Action becomes necessary to convince the child that his thinking can indeed affect the outside world. Through active manipulation of the transitional object the child confirms the "reality" of its powers, a confirmation that becomes particularly important when the level of separation anxiety is raised dramatically. Modell compares the infant to the Paleolithic cave-painters and draws an analogy between the child's beginning awareness of separation and primitive man's beginning awareness of the inevitability of death. As sorcerers, delegated by their society, the cave-painters performed a magical ritual by projecting the feared, and at the same time needed, animals onto the walls of the cave, thus killing them in absentia. This ritual must have supplied them with sufficient energy to strengthen the horde for the next attack on the terrifying mammoth. In other words, the creation and destruction of an imaginary animal empowered them to destroy the real one.

The infant does not seem to go that far, at least according to most researchers of early development. The transitional object rarely becomes the target of and receptacle for aggressive impulses. Only psychotic children attack their transitional objects, which then may turn into "psychotic fetishes," a term coined by Mahler.

We can nevertheless assume that the child is capable of

regulating the presence or absence, the existence or nonexistence, of the primary object represented by the transitional object, just like the Paleolithic artists could decide about the life and death of the animal represented by the painting on the wall. A ritualized repetitiveness is an essential part of this process, which is clearly demonstrable for both infants and Cro-Magnon artists. Modell cites evidence to this effect and shows that the cave-paintings were frequently executed on top of each other in certain "holy" sites of the cave. Freud used the peek-a-boo game, a similar form of repetitive action, as evidence for the existence of a death instinct in his controversial essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." In order to apply these observations to the artists mentioned earlier, we must undertake two major leaps: from Paleolithic times to the 20th century and from infancy to adulthood. It is unlikely that anyone would doubt the persistence of sorcerers in many different forms throughout the centuries until present times. It is not only archaic societies such as Australian Aborigines and Siberian Eskimos that venerate shamanistic personalities and believe that they are endowed with magical powers. Most Western religions contain elements of sorcery as central features in their ceremonies. Exorcism, confession, and other ceremonial forms can all be seen as ritualistic derivatives of primitive sorcery.

But it appears that artists too can turn into sorcerers, as we shall demonstrate. The role of inanimate objects in the leap from childhood to adulthood has been a focus of many discussions in psychoanalytic literature; and their role is not clearly resolved even now. The fate of the transitional object might serve as a guideline in exploring this development in the journey from infancy to adult life. Winnicott claims that the transitional object is gradually decathected as "it becomes not so much forgotten as relegated to limbo. It does not go inside, is not repressed and not mourned." The word limbo implies that it either remains wherever it is or reemerges at a future point. And indeed there seem to exist three forms in which transitional objects can persist beyond the genital phase and reemerge later: as fetishes, transitional phenomena, and linking objects.

Adult fetishism requires the presence of a particular inanimate object for the achievement of genital orgasm. This entity has been described extensively by authors such as Freud, Bak, and others. Winnicott defines the fetish as an "object that is employed on account of a delusion of a maternal phallus," an idea that has remained central in conceptualizations of the fetish. Greenacre has postulated a disturbance of body-image, related to a pre-oedipal or oedipal castration trauma, as the etiologic determinant of adult fetishism. She defines a "pre-oedipal castration trauma" as a complementary combination of early genitalization and excessive separation anxiety. This constellation frequently leads to the persistence of the transitional object in the form of a childhood fetish, originally described by Wulff and later extensively researched by Roiphe and Galenson.

Transitional phenomena or the transitional mode can be seen as abstractions of the transitional object. Winnicott described them as "intermediate areas of experience . . . ([just like] art [and] religion) which [are] not challenged [and] in direct continuity with the play-area of the small child who is 'lost' in play." The persistence of transitional phenomena into adulthood is illustrated in many articles in a recent book edited by Grolnick, Barkan and Muensterberger.

A number of authors have alluded to the possibility of the reemergence or reactivation of a transitional object in adulthood. Kahne speaks about "a reversion to a specific object . . . when there is the threat of deprivation." Volkan and Kavanaugh give accounts of three borderline patients who have used cats as "reactivated transitional objects" in the course of their analyses. Volkan described the frequent observation of a "linking object" in pathological mourners. These objects are often former belongings of the deceased that serve to facilitate externalization of ambivalent feelings towards the lost object. They

also allow a transient merging with the mourned while simultaneously assuring the mourner that he has control over the distance between them. Volkan stresses the pathological aspect of this phenomenon and proposes that the "mourner needs to stop using the linking object to bring it with all its implications into the field of therapeutic working through."

When we attempt to apply these formulations to artists and their special relationships, we are faced with the question: Are all artists fetishists, pathological mourners, or both, and does their relationship to their work rely on "regressive and magical identification . . . to make good the early disillusionment incurred by the still nascent ego," as Muensterberger has put it?

In contrast to such sweeping propositions, we feel that these concepts are applicable to some artists some of the time. We believe that the occurrence of such particular relationships to works of art is directly related to the degree of early object loss and the resulting fear of further losses and body disintegration. We assume that threats of object loss and body disintegration in infantile life are synonymous and mutually interchangeable. Object loss causes fear of physical disintegration and attacks on the body result in vulnerability and anticipation of further object loss. To confirm this thesis we ought to be able to demonstrate such early threats in the lives of our artists. We would then be able to understand their need to maintain a special relationship to some of their works as stemming from those early experiences. But it is not by virtue of these early threats but rather by virtue of their artistic gift that they come to learn that such a relationship indeed strengthens them in a magical way and helps them avert their fears of loss and disintegration.

When Picasso was three years old his hometown of Malaga was shaken by an earthquake that lasted for three consecutive days and nights. During one of those terrifying nights, immediately after the family had escaped from their damaged house to a safer environment, his mother gave birth to a girl they named Lola. It is almost certain that Picasso witnessed the birth of his sister in the midst of chaos and destruction. Remnants of his memories of this traumatic event appear almost 40 years later in the paintings that he executed around the time of the birth of his first daughter Maya. At age six, right after the birth of his next sister Conchita, young Picasso developed a severe school phobia. From then on the great master had need to protect himself against the evil powers of women. He became convinced that he himself had magical powers and could express them through his art. He often thought that his portraits might result in the death of his subjects and therefore used Cubist fragmentation to camouflage his close friends beyond recognition. As another example of his magical beliefs, he referred to the "Demoiselles d'Avignon" as his first "exorcist" painting and claimed that the African masks would protect him from the evil spirits lodged in the depicted women.

Picasso's idea about the "evil spirit in women" could very well be linked to the experience of his mother giving birth to Lola, surrounded by the trembling earth. It is unlikely that a three year old can have a concept of the earth trembling on its own account. Instead he might have felt that it was his mother who, in the throes of labor, actually caused the earthquake. Subsequent separations were probably reminiscent of this event and invariably put him in a state of panic, often manifested as

REMEMBERED

Edward Preble

Leon Saul

attacks of generalized tremor. In later life he found a remedy in his art: he became the omnipotent sorcerer that his mother appeared to have been, possibly by giving birth to his paintings. His canvases were the masks and shields that he created to protect himself from his fears of annihilation and to protect others from his rageful impulses towards them.

Very little is known about Kurt Schwitters' early childhood other than that it appears undisturbed. Occurrences around age 11 make it difficult to sustain this notion. Kurt's favorite pastime had been gardening, and he was apparently quite successful at it. One day, a horde of kids destroyed his precious vegetable beds willfully. Kurt immediately fell into a "seizure-like, paralyzed state," which supposedly developed into an epileptic condition. With the garden-womb analogy in mind, we might easily think of his garden as a childhood fetish whose roots extended into earliest infancy. The destruction of this revered object must have rekindled very primitive fears that he might have been able to regulate later on through his involvement with the "Merzbau." He became again the creator of his very own universe where he would contain, bury, and unearth fragments belonging to people he was close to.

The other three artists that we mentioned are similar in a unique way: each suffered a parental loss or sustained absence during their childhood. Leonardo lived with his mother only until the age of five, when his father took him into his house to be a son to his barren wife. Gorky's father emigrated when his son was very young, and his mother died only a few years later. At 14 the young artist fled alone from his tormented homeland, Armenia; and Seidel's father committed suicide when Jochen was 10, upon which his mother left in a panic and placed the children with a neighbor.

Death and separations have subsequently become the most significant and traumatic events in the lives of these three artists and were intimately connected to the special relations that tied them to some of their works. Leonardo was 41 when his real mother, Catarina, died. Freud documented Leonardo's obsessional way of dealing with her death and then proceeded to trace the famous "smile" in many of the works following her death to his mother's expression. Freud writes: "[Leonardo] met the woman [who posed for 'Mona Lisa'] who awakened his memory of his mother's happy smile of sensual rapture; and, influenced by this revived memory, he recovered the stimulus that guided him at the beginning of his artistic endeavors, at the time when he modeled the smiling women [as an adolescent]. He painted the 'Mona Lisa,' and 'St. Anne with Two Others' and the series of mysterious pictures which are characterized by the enigmatic smile. With the help of the oldest of all his erotic impulses he enjoyed the triumph of once more conquering the inhibition of his art." It remains unclear in precisely what way the revival of a memory can account for the intensity and longevity of Leonardo's relationship to these paintings. There must be something about the prolonged and repeated confrontation with this memory that helped the artist deal with the reality of his mother's death—possibly by denying it and merging with her intermittently in the process of executing these paintings.

Can these works, begun so closely related to the deaths of both parents (father died in 1504), be seen in Volkan's terms as the linking objects of a pathological mourner? This is quite possible, since Leonardo's early history was certainly not suited to developing the capacity to mourn successfully and to integrate separations, as Eissler has pointed out in his description of Leonardo as a pathological mourner.

Gorky's portraits of himself and his mother can certainly be seen in a similar way, although this could be elaborated much more distinctly by looking at the details of these works and the processes that led to their final appearance. He ended his life through suicide after a series of bodily injuries and separation from his wife. This links him to Seidel, the painter with whom the authors are most familiar.

In his rhythm of creation and destruction Seidel was much more explicit about the forces that tormented him than were the others, including Gorky; for Seidel it was not enough to demonstrate his magical omnipotence by carefully preserving the lost object—for example, by fondling it endlessly with the tip of a brush or inhaling the precious odors of the paint, just like the infant with an impregnated blanket. Aggressive impulses were an integral part of the ritual, much like for the cave-painter whose artistic hands would soon enough lash into the flesh of giant animals.

After a traumatic encounter with his mother, which must have symbolized the reenactment of their separation during childhood, and the departure of his wife and children, he needed the magical activity of the photopainting desperately. This activity enabled him to (symbolically) turn a passive experience of being left into an active mastery of the trauma and thus forestall the most intense fears of not going on being. A desire to destroy his love objects alternated rapidly with the wish to merge with them, even at the cost of his own destruction. The temporary disintegrations that were part of this process must have helped him go on, much in the same way that the "ecstasies" involved in the manipulation of ritual objects help the sorcerer and the infant.

But neither the infant nor the sorcerer and his group can persist purely by virtue of their rituals. They need to experience the effect of their actions on the world around them. The child cannot exist without seeing his needs fulfilled, just as the Cro-Magnon people could not survive without a successful hunt. Seidel, too, needed to experience the effects of his magic on reality. He expected the environment to respond by providing him with acclaim, financial success, and the return of his lost family, none of which occurred. By itself, the magic of the photopainting was doomed to fail.

Plath predicted the outcome of such a struggle in a grisly way when she wrote: "The blood jet is poetry, there is no stopping it." And indeed there was no stopping it, once it became clear that Seidel's increasing needs could never be matched by the dwindling provisions of reality. For Seidel, and many other artists who committed suicide, the magical ritual, as expressed in an intense and idiosyncratic relationship to some of their works, turned into a terminal struggle. The desperate attempt to maintain integrity with the help of the art work could not withstand the onslaught of overwhelming aggression towards the missing love object. The end result for these artists was an irreversible fragmentation and, finally, the destruction of all objects, animate or inanimate, outside, inside or transitional.

Mel Roman and Peter Stasny are Professor and Instructor, respectively, in the Department of Psychiatry, Albert Einstein College of Medicine.