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An Inquiry into Art and Madness: The Career of Jochen Seidel

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> I have a statement of a human kind
> to make in my work, and the raw
> material for it is my life.
>
> Jochen Seidel

A year after making this statement, Jochen Seidel, a gifted German painter, hanged himself from the ceiling of his New York studio. At the time of his death he was 47, twice divorced, and estranged from both the son of his first marriage and the son and daughter of his second. He had miraculously survived three prior suicide attempts, was deeply in debt, and had few friends; in spite of the fact that his exceedingly original work had gained him considerable recognition in Germany he had failed to achieve any success in the United States.[1]

This article is an attempt to understand the various and complex ways in which Seidel's life informed and shaped his art, and to raise again the many unanswered questions about the relationship between art and madness. We will not be addressing the issue of the origin of talent or genius, but we will be exploring the way one gifted painter used his work to attempt to resolve

[1]Since his death in 1971, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of his work. Works by Seidel are now in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Guggenheim Museum, the National Museum of American Art of the Smithsonian Institution, the Brooklyn Museum, the Neuberger Museum, and several other major institutions.

deep-seated psychological conflicts. What is unique about Seidel is that he did his most radical and original work during the last two years of his life, a time of great emotional turmoil during which he suffered several psychotic episodes. Most psychoanalytic studies on the subject have demonstrated that the relationship between psychosis and creativity is a negative one. His life and work challenge that assumption.

Our purpose here is to support the findings—by such theorists as Melanie Klein, Ella Sharpe, and George Pollock, among others—that creative work is a response to loss and an effort at self-healing. The Seidel material illustrates that the effort to deal with loss and depression, the struggle against overwhelming guilt and anxiety, fueled and perhaps even inspired his most creative work. Klein, Sharpe, and Pollock have maintained that guilt and the desire to restore a lost love object are universal, basic factors in the creative experience. According to them, the creation of art consists in great part of the act of unconsciously restoring in fantasy those persons who have been lost or destroyed.

Most of the major factors regarding the dynamics of creative artists and their work are still widely disputed and subject to frequent discussions among psychoanalysts and others.

In a study of parental loss and genius, Marvin Eisenstadt (1978) was able to show a significant relationship between the occurrence of one and the frequency of the other. Geniuses do seem to have suffered a much higher incidence of parental loss through death during the early years of their lives than others. And both George Pollock (1978) and Kurt Eissler (1978) report episodes of heightened artistic activity immediately following a significant loss. Tor-Björn Hagglund (1978) assumes that the repetitive aspects of creative work can be a result of incomplete mourning, a theory that would add to our understanding of the higher incidence of parental deaths in geniuses.

Phyllis Greenacre (1957) has stressed the importance of an identification with a lost father in the life histories of artists and has described this relationship as particularly powerful, comparing it to a state of awe. In her 1958 article "The Family Romance of the Artist" she examined the lives of four outstanding men. Chatterton and Stanley lost their fathers, respectively, before birth and at the age of three months; Gogol's father died when Nikolai was sixteen, and Rilke's parents divorced when Rainer Maria turned nine. All four sought identification with strong father figures in their creative lives, presumably to make up for the absent father, and all four also showed severe degrees of psychopathology: Chatterton committed suicide at eighteen, Gogol starved himself at forty-three, and Rilke

became psychotic after the age of thirty-two. Stanley was the only one to have succeeded in his search for the lost father.

Creative art has always contained an element of destruction, one aspect of which was articulated by Picasso when he explained: "In my case a picture is a sum of destructions. I do a picture, then I destroy it. In the end nothing is lost: The red I took away from one place turns up somewhere else" (quoted by Malraux, 1976, pp. 137-138). The facts of artists' lives make it evident that the creative act is often used to externalize and cope with both constructive and destructive energies. It can be seen as a continuing process, a fluctuation between seemingly contradictory, yet dialectically related, forces of the human mind. It was to the interaction of these tendencies that Freud (1920) alluded in his much disputed article, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," when he postulated Eros and Thanatos as the two major drives in human existence. Some writers have seen art as a representation of that struggle, both within the individual artist and within society in general.

It seems to us that the modern artist suspends himself rather precariously between the destructive tensions of all forms, objects, and the self, and restitution through the creation of new forms and symbols. In this way, he/she fluctuates between two self-representational states: the omnipotent master of all reality and the annihilated object of his/her own aggressive impulses.

It seems reasonable to assume that an intact and strong ego is essential to warrant restitution, continuity, and ultimately, survival. This leads us to a distinction between a "healthy" progression of the creative rhythm and a variety of "pathological" outcomes.

Suicide and madness have often been mentioned as frequent occurrences in the lives of creative people, and although there are numerous anecdotal reports of such instances, we are not aware of systematic evidence in support of this notion. Alvarez (1970) writes about the many poets who have either attempted or actually committed suicide, including himself. Similar material is found in writings about painters. But with the exception of Leo Navratil and Alfred Bader's (1976) study of seven painters who became psychotic at one point during their careers, madness or psychosis in relation to artistic activity is still to be researched systematically.

In examining the relationship between psychosis and art, we would like to make a clear distinction between the artistic activities of the mentally ill and psychotic reactions in artists. This distinction is based on whether a person became mentally ill and then began to paint, or whether he or she

was a functioning artist who later suffered from psychotic decompensation. Along with many other writers in this field, we feel that the creative work of these two groups is qualitatively different in regard to its respective artistic value, a notion that we shall describe further when we present some of Seidel's works.

In spite of this somewhat arbitrary distinction, we believe that the interaction between psychosis and art is still poorly understood. Whether psychotic art can be differentiated from art in general through observing its detachment from the contents of art history is an intriguing notion that certainly has not been satisfactorily resolved. Another dimension of distinguishing between the art of the psychotic and that of the nonpsychotic depends upon the taste and the standards of art's critics and its audience. The traditional division between beautiful and ugly has long ceased to be applicable, yet to a large degree it is still the sophisticated spectator who dictates what we regard as public opinion. It is a relationship that takes us back to the ego of the individual artist, described by Freud to be outfitted with a particular idiosyncratic quality: "The writer softens the 'egotistical' characteristics of his daydream and bribes us by the offer of a purely formal, that is, aesthetic, pleasure." The implication of this statement is that the artist's success at the effort of "softening" is what determines whether a work of art will be accepted as aesthetically pleasurable or not. In some cases, psychosis might lead to a deterioration of precisely this "softening" quality in the artist, and therefore render his art unpalatable and unacceptable to us.

Before proceeding with our illustration, let us turn briefly to the phenomenon of suicide as the most devastating of the potential outcomes of an artist's struggle. We have referred to artistic creativity as an ongoing rhythm, fueled by a need to repeat and interrupted only by physical illness or death. If we assume that a cessation or depletion of this energy might be directly related to subsequent suicide, it might be useful to explore what it is that drives artists to continue their creative activity. If it is Eros that fuels the repeated creations, is it Thanatos that emerges in their cessation? If the drive to create art is a kind of compulsion to repeat, impelled by the urge to confront oneself over and over with a painful emotion, possibly guilt over the imaginary destruction of an important loved one, then it is also a magical ritual that leads to emotionally important consequences purely by virtue of its symbolic content and its repetitive nature. Among the many functions of this magic, we find as a primary one the re-creation of lost loved ones in an "idealized" form. Invariably this process leads to the artist's realization that such an endeavor is doomed to fail, and that the

loved ones created cannot remain merged to the artist in a symbiotic fashion, although this sometimes occurs, as in the case of Edward Munch, for example. The successful artist is able to compensate for this painful realization by enjoying the public appreciation for his work and by establishing and maintaining stable, rewarding relations with "real" loved ones. But if either of these compensatory gratifications fails, the artistic activity may become exclusively self-involved, or even self-involved to the point of psychosis. It is at this point that the artist may become especially vulnerable, and that further disruptions in his/her life outside the studio might lead to attempted suicide.

For the seven years that Jochen Seidel lived in New York, he and the senior author were close personal friends and neighbors. Especially toward the beginning of this period, Seidel was regarded as a painter's painter, an intensely charming and magnetic person whose volatility, fierce intelligence, and sheer vulnerability made him the very image of the stereotypical romantic artist. This relationship and proximity included frequent discussion of his work and continual observation of work in progress. Seidel left an extraordinary amount of work (some 200 paintings and 1,000 drawings), as well as copious notes and correspondence.[2]

This article is based in great part on the analysis of selected works as well as on information derived from interviews with his family and friends. It is our assumption that art, like dream images, is at one level autobiographical, comprised of pictorial self-representations. For our purposes, paintings and drawings are the symbolic equivalents of a diarist's private journal, and as such they are valid objects of study to help deepen our understanding of a human life.

Jochen Seidel was born on April 1, 1924—April Fool's Day he was often to mention later—in a small industrial town in Germany. He was the elder of two children; his sister was born when he was two. The year before his parents had married, his father's younger brother had committed suicide by shooting himself.

Seidel often talked about his early childhood as a lonely time in which he had felt himself the outsider in a family that was cold, abusive, and always rigidly controlling. His father was an engineer, an amateur balloonist, and, from early on, a member of the Nazi movement. He described both parents as extremely ambitious and continually disappointed in their high expectations for him. His memories of his relationship with both of them were

[2]The estate is represented by the David Anderson Gallery. The work and notes are part of the estate and were presented and organized by the senior author.

exclusively negative. A year after the birth of his sister, when he was three, he was circumcised, specifically as an attempt to dissuade masturbation.

He attended nursery school at an early age and apparently did well there, as he did later in elementary school. Despite his reasonable success in school, his father continued to view him as a disappointment and a failure, while his mother's behavior, although consistently rejecting, was now at times openly seductive as well—showing off his muscles and generally preoccupied with his body.

Shortly after graduation from elementary school, when Seidel was ten, his father disappeared, determined later to have drowned under extremely mysterious circumstances. His clothing was found at the edge of a lake, and his body was recovered some four weeks later after extensive dredging. His death was explained as suicide, supposedly the result of his remorse about a love affair after which he could not face his family. Although Seidel said he was convinced that his father had committed suicide, he often speculated that he might have been murdered by Nazis as one of a series of assassinations that were taking place at that time. To this day, the precise circumstances of his father's death remain a mystery. An image of his father's body, tied with rope and weighted with heavy stones, was found in one of Jochen Seidel's notebooks after his own death.

What is of special interest to us is that his mother responded to the sudden disappearance of her husband by hurrying off to take refuge in her father's house, leaving her two children initially in the care of neighbors and later with grandparents. A month passed before she returned to take care of them. As one result of this drastic and shocking separation from both parents, Jochen and his sister were separated from one another as bedmates: for all the years preceding those dramatic events, they had been sharing the same bed. We have no firsthand information regarding the effect that the sudden disappearance of both parents and the increased distance between sister and brother must have had on the ten-year-old Jochen. No one, including Jochen, seemed to recall any immediate distress, and this in itself speaks for an aborted or, at least, incomplete mourning process, of which we shall find more evidence in his later life.

At age thirteen, Jochen's first noticable emotional difficulties began. He became chronically depressed, and many of those around him remarked on his attitude of hopelessness and indifference. His previous good school record declined sharply; now he barely managed to get by. Increasingly, he became openly angry and rebellious. He described himself as having become obsessed with masturbation, and this behavior became a major battlefield in his relationship with his mother, recalling the similar struggle

of his early childhood. She responded this time by giving him a "Christian book" which dealt with such matters, and by spying on his activities through the keyhole. The conflicts of his adolescence were heightened by the fact that she was having an affair with a tenant who boarded in the house. Jochen discovered them having intercourse on one occasion, and, in a chilling parallel to the boy's earlier history, this same lover was later to commit suicide in the house when Jochen was sixteen.

When he was seventeen, he was drafted into the German army and sent to Mannheim for basic military training, where his artistic talent was soon discovered. He quickly received special attention and was exempted from most military responsibilities, staying at Mannheim and painting pastoral watercolors as the war raged. It was there that he began to assume an identity as an artist, signing and dating his work. Many of his paintings from this period can still be seen at his parental home in Bitterfeld where his mother collected them carefully.

As the war ended in 1945, Seidel was taken prisoner by the Russians and then transferred to a British POW camp. When he returned to his hometown he found that it had become part of the Communist district.

In 1948, when he was twenty-four, he moved to Halle, the capital of the province, and entered the art academy there. By 1949, he was engaged in painting huge, government-sponsored, social-realist portraits, and quickly became a nationally known and sought-after muralist. In 1953, with the aid of a prominent art dealer, he escaped from East Germany and settled in West Berlin, where he was provided with a studio and financial support. He began to paint with a newfound freedom, and in a radically changed style.

He married in 1954, and his wife gave birth to a son about a year later. From this period stem the first eyewitness reports on Seidel's method of painting. It is said that he would, at times, paint without even stopping to eat for up to thirty-six hours at a time. The style he worked in was commonly referred to as "tachisme," in vogue in Germany at the time, a technique close to action painting in which paint is blotted on a surface and spread in rapid strokes with brushes or pieces of wood.

Seidel's intense involvement with his work was rapidly classified by those around him as eccentric, obsessional, and potentially damaging to his health. He drank heavily and was often quite depressed. Friends and family began to show their concern in a series of mostly unsuccessful attempts at rescuing him, including providing him with food. One of the most poignant events of that time was the delivery to his studio of a boiled horse's head, a gift from his mother and sister. Like all the other food that was brought to him at the time, he left it untouched, to rot in a corner. His

response might certainly have been a reflection of his highly ambivalent relationship toward his mother and sister, but one might also wonder about the significance of what they chose to nourish him.

Seidel's first marriage, unhappy from the onset, deteriorated rapidly and soon ended in a painful divorce and in the severance of all ties, including those to his son. He was never allowed to see him again. He had reacted with guilt and remorse to the painful incidents that led to the separation, and he mourned the loss of his firstborn by meticulously collecting the few memorabilia that were left. Subsequently, he immersed himself even more deeply into his painting and produced a number of strikingly beautiful tachiste works. It was at this point that his style completed its first radical shift, from the representational murals and portraits to the new freedom of the tachiste paintings. Not only did the new paintings express his psychological shift; they were also commercially successful.

Between 1959 and 1963 his work was displayed in many group and one-man shows throughout Europe and in Latin America. In 1961 he was chosen to represent Germany in the Carnegie International Art Show, his first contact with the United States. A year later, when he was thirty-eight, he accepted an invitation by Fairleigh Dickinson University to attend their International Arts Seminar. There he fell in love with a Swiss artist, eleven years younger than he. They married quickly and moved to Switzerland, where they lived in a small house owned by his new in-laws. Seidel always described the first months of their relationship in Switzerland as idyllic, enormously peaceful, and romantic.

In the years between 1959 and 1963, his painting style had undergone a series of changes. He moved from the blotchy and jabbing movements of the earlier tachiste works to a more flowing stroke, and changed his full-spectrum palette to monochromes in all blue, green, or white, reflecting the calm of his new emotional landscape as well as the Swiss setting itself. By 1963, he was eager to move to New York, the center of the art world, where he hoped to achieve widespread recognition. His wife and in-laws encouraged the venture, and the couple settled in Manhattan in 1963.

It was around that time that Seidel began a series that he referred to as the poem paintings. They were based on a love poem he had written to his wife:

> Gives us a God new life at last
> Late goal of lengthy searching?
> Will from divided being rise
> A love to rescue you and I
> or are we over-reaching?

When we are one in constant yearning
Not to be harmed when thus allied
Then I'll be shown each day
That strength of love can stay
With just your tender smile as guide.[3]

For the first time in the development of Seidel's art we note the emergence of content in a concretized form, rather than in purely emotionally guided abstraction. But instead of resorting to a pictorial image, he used the actual lines and letters of poem of particular significance to him. His early attempts in word imagery diverge considerably from those of most other artists who have worked in this genre: Seidel incorporates the words themselves into the image, while fragmenting and destroying them at the same time. With the notable exception of another German artist, Ferdinand Kriwet, we find that most of those who use words in their pictures—Klee, Indiana, Rivers, for example—still maintain a clear boundary between the words or letters and the pictorial image. Seidel achieves a true amalgam between poetry and painting: the poem as spatial arrangement and semantic content is destroyed, but it is simultaneously preserved through the construction of a rudimentary grid and colored segments of letters. The original content can be deciphered only painstakingly, even with a knowledge of the poem's original German wording.

In admiring the successful synthesis of such traditionally divergent art forms as poetry and painting, we should recall that in his poem Seidel expresses his desire to merge two inherently separate beings. He also seems to be sharing his longing to unify two incompatible aspects of himself, a theme that would reverberate in his later works. His hope that through merging with a loved one he would be able to annul the painful contradictions of his own personality is lucidly reflected in this masterful attempt at erasing the boundaries between language and imagery.

[3]"The original German version is as follows:

Schenkt uns ein Got ein neves Leben
Langen Suchens spaetes Ziel?
Wird von den gespaltnen Wesen
Unsre Liebe uns erloesen
Oder wollen wir zuviel?

Wenn wir eins in stetem Streben
Unver letzbar nur zu zweit
Weist mir jeder neve tag
Was der Liebe Kraft vermag
Und deines Laechelns Zaertlichkeit

Jochen Seidel, 1962

Soon after the couple's arrival in New York his wife became pregnant; she gave birth to a son in May 1965. The daughter of a conventional upper-middle-class family, she had not wanted a child; she was ambivalent about the casual living conditions that prevailed in their downtown Manhattan loft, and concerned as well about an interruption of her own painting. Seidel, who had very much wanted a child, was delighted that he had a new son. She became depressed, and their relationship began to deteriorate. As her depression became more pronounced, he began drinking heavily and frequently erupted in wild outbursts of rage. They sought professional help as a couple in 1965, and after some therapy, Seidel's wife and their son went to stay for two months with her parents in Switzerland. When she returned to New York, a second child, a girl, was conceived; she was born in 1967. Seidel began preparing for his first American one-man show at Goethe House in New York.

The work he did for this exhibition represents still another drastic shift in his style; all the paintings were rectangular, with hard-edge lines, harsh colors, and an asymmetrical geometry. It is not clear how much of this shift in style was geared toward commercial success—his wife had been urging him to give up the poem paintings and change his style—or how much of it derived from his need to defend himself against potentially destructive emotions. In any case, the show, mounted in January 1968, was a commercial failure. Soon after it, the entire family traveled to Europe for a brief visit. We know little about this trip, but we do know that Seidel paid a visit to his mother, during which he became engaged in a violent argument with her. He refused to stay in Switzerland, as his wife urged, and returned alone to New York in July 1968. During his stay in Europe he had rapidly produced a series of hard-edge paintings, which he described as landscapes: using a bright, full-spectrum palette, he had divided the space diagonally. Compared to the lyrical monochromatic landscapes of 1963/64, the work of this period expressed a profound sense of restraint, a quality that seemed in real opposition to the affectionate merging with nature that had characterized the earlier work.

Soon after his return alone to New York, Seidel attempted to kill himself by oven gas; this was the first recorded suicide attempt by inhaling. He was hospitalized briefly and received outpatient individual psychotherapy with the first of what was to become a series of male therapists.

In September 1968, although his emotional state was still quite unstable, he began a teaching job at Pratt Institute. The relationship with his wife and children continued through correspondence. It appears that each was urging the other to join him or her, refusing to compromise. It is noteworthy that their separation had been at least partly precipitated by conflict

over money. She was persuaded that living in Europe would reproduce the success he once had enjoyed there, and provide a rich environment for their children. For him, returning to live in Europe represented an admission of failure, the "selling out" of his art and individuality for the acquisition of bourgeois security.

He continued in psychotherapy, while generally leading a rather chaotic life. Almost two years elapsed between his first and second suicide attempts. Those years were marked by a number of highly erratic episodes, occasionally resulting in brief hospitalizations, and an enormous creative productivity. He painted and drew on virtually everything he could get access to, overpainted many of the earlier canvases that were stacked in the studio, wrote numerous letters, and kept copious autobiographical notes. The surviving results provide us with unique insights into the nature of the relationship between his work and his life.

Among the overpainted works, the so-called photo-painting is the most striking example of the process of Seidel's experience. It changed constantly, from photorealism to total abstraction. At first glance it appears as a whorl of colors—chiefly red, blue, green, and yellow—mixed with shades of gray, a somewhat chaotic movement that provokes a feeling of vertigo in the observer. On closer scrutiny, one might find some relief at the discovery of a rudimentary grid, reminiscent of the poem series, and finally one grabs hold of a multitude of emerging images: faces, eyes, noses, profiles, limbs, and bodies, all embedded into this maelstrom of color, leaving us uncertain about whether they might emerge further or vanish completely. Some of the images resemble fading black-and-white photographs, while others appear as distorted images in an undulating mirror. But there are also segments of this painting in which the faces appear so clearly that they bear a striking resemblance to portraits in a family album (Fig. 1). Seidel was quite aware of this and often would allude to the specific identities he had contrived to bury and to bring alive in his painting. He would point out his wife and children, his parents, his sister, and his friends, emerging and vanishing again. It is extraordinary how clearly this remarkable piece of art reflects the tragedy of Seidel's life, the many losses that he suffered from childhood on, and with what absolute lucidity it illustrates the way in which he had learned to use his art to attempt to work through feelings of loss and grief. The process enabled him to create and destroy, to re-create and redestroy, to fragment and to mend those objects that he perceived as lost—whether lost as a result of his own doing, as he frequently assumed, or as a result of the doings of others. For Seidel, who from young adulthood had felt himself gifted, special, and so exempted from the conventional rules of human relationships, there must have been something very power-

FIGURE 1. *Family Portrait* (photo painting), 1969–70.

ful to this process, almost magical. One imagines the self-image of an omnipotent sorcerer, controlling the world through his artistic creations. We find this pivotal mechanism in many other paintings and drawings, but rarely has it been illustrated as clearly as in this one.

Not only his own emotional turmoil, but the political upheavals of the 1960s were constantly reflected in his art of this period. Conceived out of his suffering, they served as vehicles for extremely insightful self-reflection, and also achieved an increase of originality in his works. One instance of some of his bizarre behavior at the time is reflected in a painting called *The Fool* (Fig. 2). Seidel had walked the subway tracks, dressed as a member of the Viet Cong and throwing away virtually all of his money. In what is clearly a self-portrait (we remember that he was born on April Fool's Day), the painting communicates his self-ridiculing torment: dressed as a harlequin, the figure's body and the painting itself are divided into two complementary halves, while the head contains a spiral labyrinth of chaos. This organized chaos is composed of many of the elements that we find in other of his paintings of those months. The fool throws out money and other amorphous material that is depicted as even less organized than the content of his head.

Considering the delusional nature of many of his outbursts during this period, it is astonishing how accurately and clearly Seidel attempted to organize and reflect his experiences through his art. He himself was quite aware of the particular function that his creative activities served, and expressed his consciousness of it in many of his drawings. From the many examples that illustrate this awareness, we selected the drawing called *Ich suche mein Heil in der Knust* ("I search for my welfare in art") (Fig. 3). Not only does it show us how Seidel used the medium for self-reflection and healing, it also exemplifies his highly original use of language within the imagery. The underlying sentence is arranged in such a way that the result closely resembled the contours of a human head, neck, and shoulders. The word *Ich* ("I") is placed on top, where the brain—which is commonly identified with the self—is located. The word *suche* ("to search, to look for") occupies the space where we might expect to find the eyes, and the letter K forms the chin *Kinn*. The technique of blurring the boundaries of the letters through smearing and repeated overdrawing results in fragmentations and juxtapositions that create new meanings. *Mein* ("my") turns into *Sein* ("his"), *in der* ("in the") into *minder* ("less important") or *Munder* ("mouths"). The K of *Kunst* ("art") is added onto *in der* and spells *Kinn* ("chin") and *Kinder* ("children"), a highly significant word in Seidel's life.

In spite of the fairly straightforward emergence of these fluctuating meanings, we have no way of knowing whether these associations took

FIGURE 2. Photo painting (detail), 1969.

place in Seidel's mind while he executed his drawing. Much less can we assume that he was consciously aware of them. Some evidence in his notebooks indicates that his drawings were not totally spontaneous, and that he usually did a series of sketches before he proceeded to the final version of the drawing. Nevertheless it is clear that he was able to merge

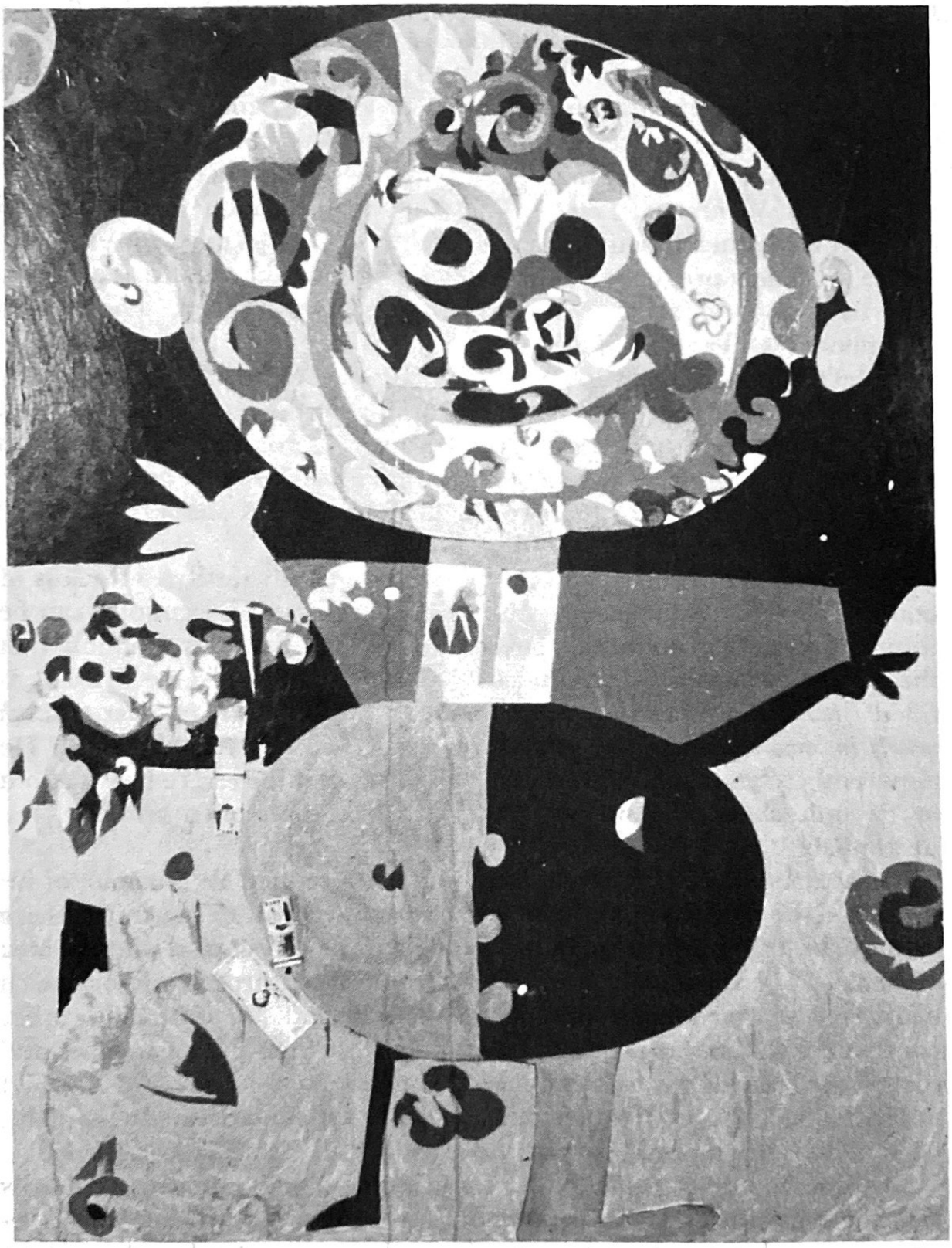

FIGURE 3. *The Fool*, ca. 1970.

meaning as expressed through language and meaning as expressed through form in an intriguing and unique fashion, particularly during episodes of psychotic decompensation.

In the works of 1969, we find almost all of Seidel's paintings flooded with the themes of fragmentation, confusion of identity, and destruction. Devouring hard-edge structures in dark, foreboding colors—often black—invade his earlier works by means of further overpainting (the one illustrated is titled *Mother and Father*) (Fig. 4). The separation from wife and children is another repetitive theme: in *Labour Day* (Fig. 5), for example, where a possibly pregnant figure with an embryolike structure attached to it turns away from another one that is embedded in black. The written comment says, "Vaya con dios, my darling."

Seidel's art at this point has made a quantum leap forward in originality and power. His word drawings and paintings reflect a unity of art and poetry. In some ways, they are beyond poetry. Words and letters stand as forms free and unbound as in a new composition. The word does not need the phrase, nor the letter the word; they function as shapes backed by color. The color also, like a sound, stands by itself.

A number of drawings from this period poignantly testify to the loss of boundaries that Seidel had begun to experience. Many examples can be found that inform us of his struggle with impulses and emotion that threatened to inundate and ultimately annihilate his self. One drawing is titled *I had to understand how my mind works (as a machine) in order to sneak myself in, turn on the power, so that I am riding on the beast bare assed.* He apparently related to his unconscious impulses as if they were beasts about to be unleashed, releasing destructive forces that, once set free, are unstoppable.

Unfortunately, he had reached a point of no return. Yet, in spite of his profound depression and intense drive toward self-destruction, there seems to be little evidence in his work that he was preoccupied with the idea of suicide. There was, however, the matter of his bathroom mirror, which he had transformed into a work of art, just as he had done with many other parts of the studio. He painted the left half of the oval mirror in black and spelled the following words around it: "I am happy, yes I am . . . I AM SUI SEIDEL." He thus confronted himself daily with the dividedness of his personality—the "happy" part on the right and the "suicidal" on the left.

On June 16, 1970, Seidel wrote a suicide note and swallowed a deadly amount of Doriden. He was found hours later, apparently dead. Nevertheless, he was taken to a hospital and, after a deep coma that lasted five days, successfully revived. He was transferred to the training ward at Bronx State Hospital for psychiatric treatment, where he received individual

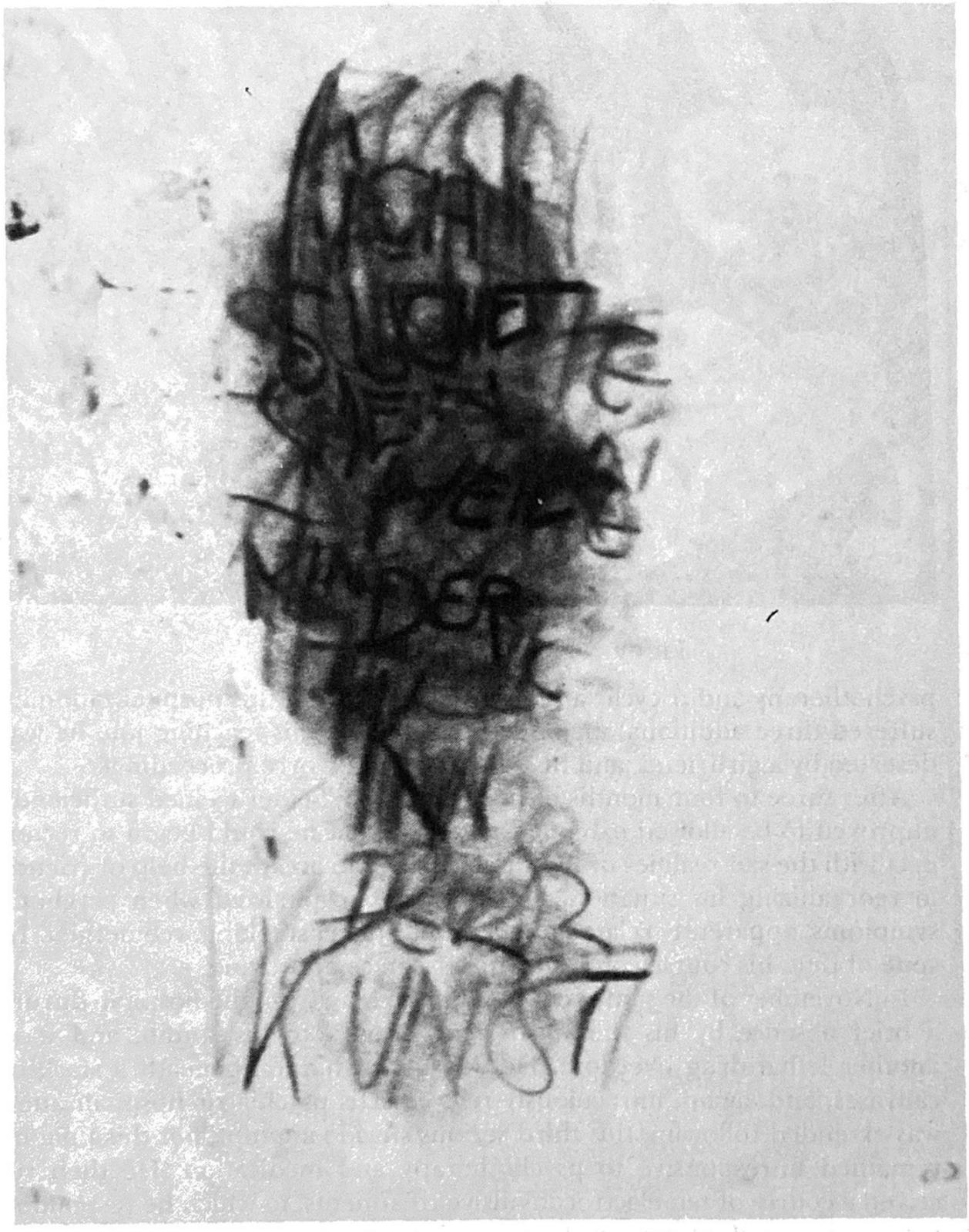

FIGURE 4. *Ich suche mein Heil in der Kunst,* ca. 1970.

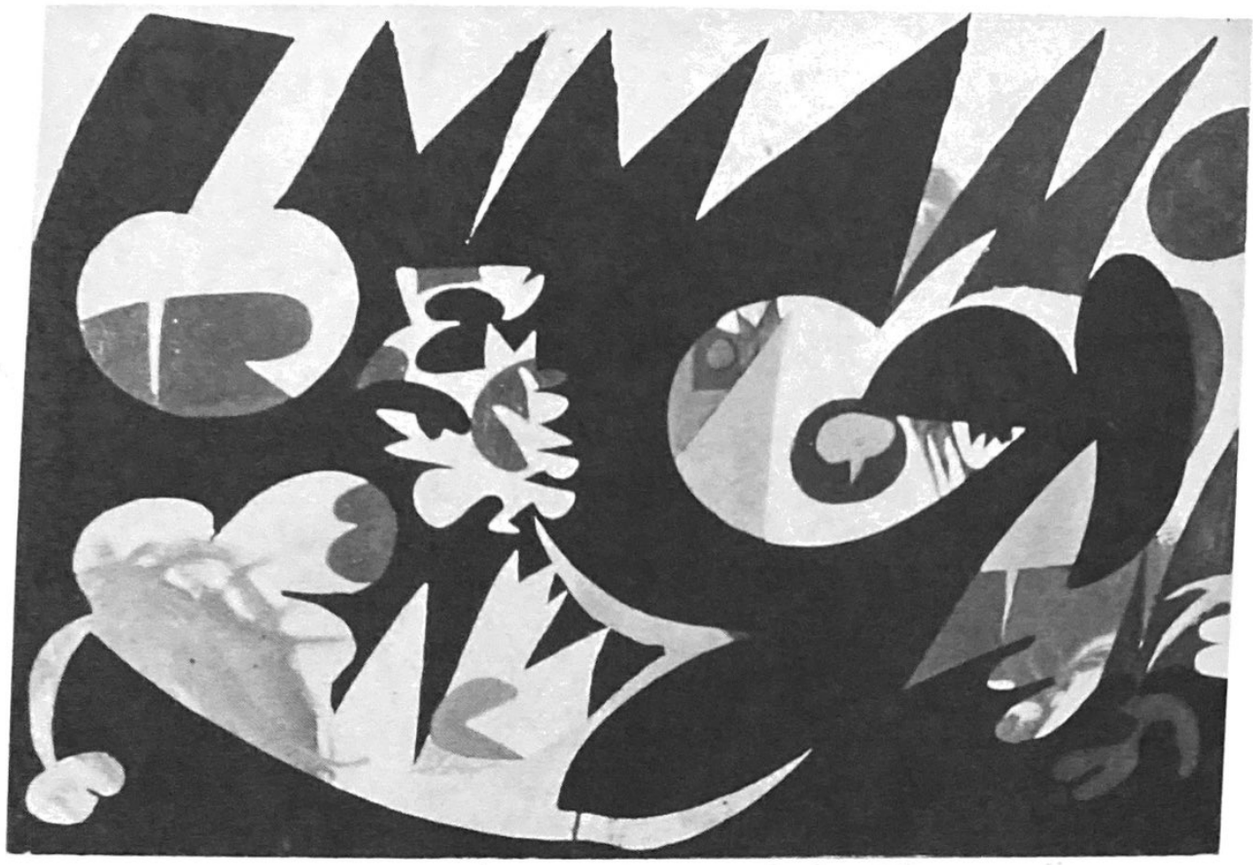

FIGURE 5. *Mother and Father,* 1970.

psychotherapy and tricyclic antidepressants. During this hospitalization he suffered three additional major setbacks: he lost his teaching job, he was deserted by a girlfriend, and his wife initiated divorce proceedings.

After three to four months of hospitalization, Seidel seemed sufficiently improved to be allowed extended passes so that he could begin to reconnect with the sad realities of his life. He began to accept the help of friends in reorganizing his situation, but he was rehospitalized when psychotic symptoms, apparently related to heavy marijuana smoking, reemerged. In spite of that, his course continued to be seen as improving.

In November of the same year he slipped away from the hospital, during a brief absence by his therapist, went straight to his studio, and took another lethal drug overdose. He was found hidden beneath a stack of canvases, and, again, miraculously revived. His psychiatric hospitalization was extended following this third serious suicide attempt, but this time he remained unresponsive to psychotherapy and medication. He then received a course of ten electroconvulsive treatments, to which he responded with a profound regression. In spite of the persisting suicide risk, he was discharged to outpatient care in the beginning of 1971. For a while he

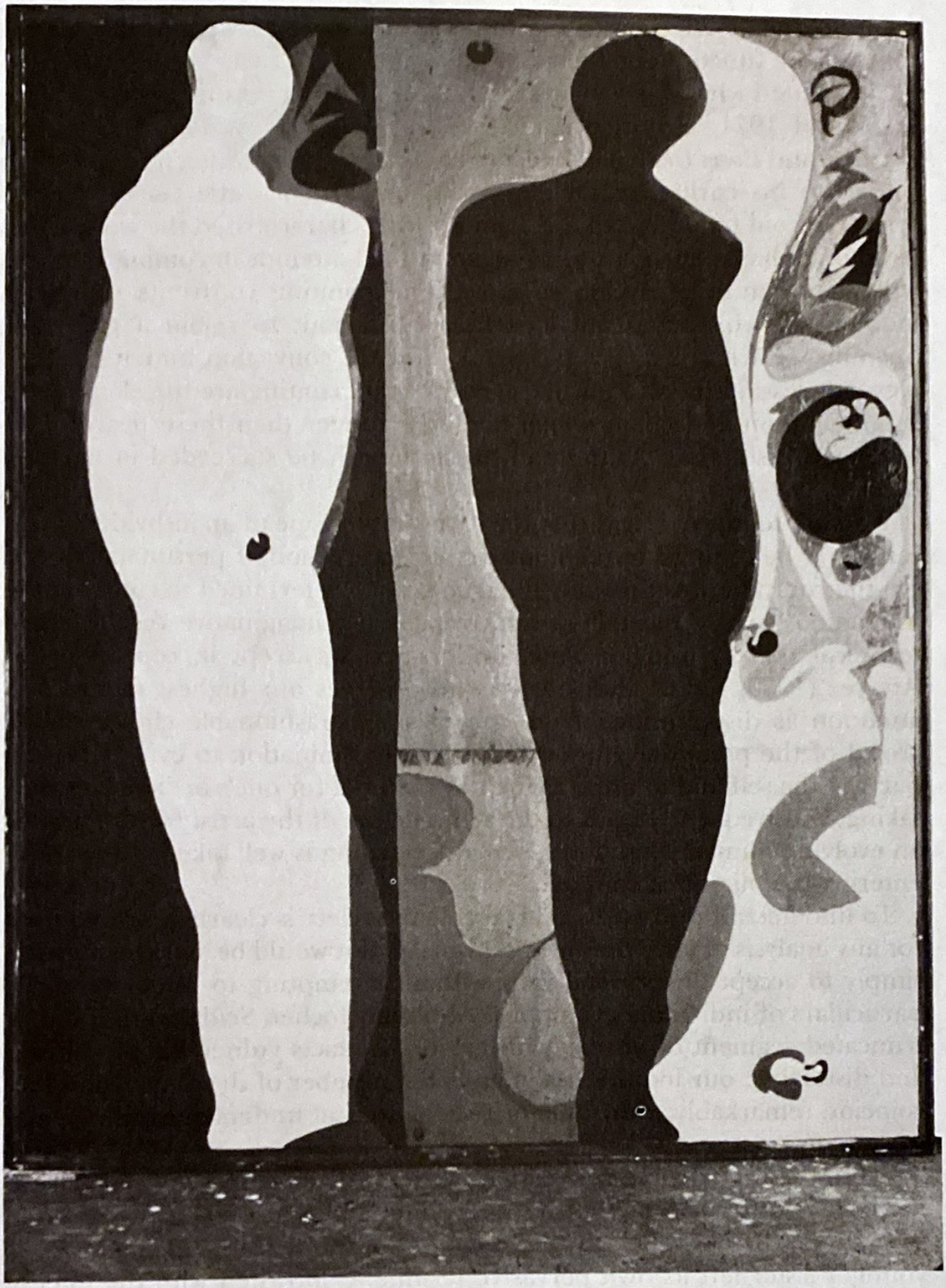

FIGURE 6. *Labor Day* (Leonardo da Vinci), 1970.

continued in psychotherapy twice a week and was able to gradually resume some of the functions of everyday life.

He painted what was to be his last painting during his therapist's vacation in May of 1971. He titled it twice: *The complete renunciation of everything dramatic* and *Poem Destroyed.* Executed in magenta and white, it represents a return to his earlier geometric works, in particular the Goethe House series. Devoid of almost all the elements that characterized the work of his psychotic phases, it seems to proclaim a final attempt in coming to terms with his agonizing psychic tensions. The painting confronts us with a moment in which a pendent structure is about to rejoin a gravellike opening, and it conveys a powerful sense of conviction and resolution. Nevertheless, in the windowlike center of the painting are the elements of fragmentation and chaos which proved stronger than these peaceful attempts at resolution. At the end of the month he succeeded in hanging himself.

We want to make it clear that the extreme struggle of an individual artist can never be reduced to the idiosyncratic expression of personal torment. On the contrary, it is precisely the true artist, "determined to confront the intimations of . . . mortality itself, using every imaginative resource and technical skill to bring it close, understand it, accept it, control it," as Alvarez (1970, p. 261) has put it, who deserves our highest regard and attention as distinguished from the palatable fashionable choice of the crowd of the pseudo-avant-gardist. This determination to evulse deepest parts of the self and to use it as the raw material for one's art involves risk-taking, and frequently leads to the self-sacrifice of the artist for the sake of an evolving human condition. Cocteau's warning is well taken: "Beware of entering the mirror of your art."

To understand the artist's central role in society is clearly a prerequisite for any analysis of an artist's life and work, but it would be a grave omission simply to accept this societal view without attempting to understand the particulars of individual evolutions. Although Jochen Seidel's life is only a truncated segment of history with most of its facts vulnerable to oblivion and distortion, our inquiry has identified a number of dynamic issues that coincide remarkably with some of the theoretical understanding we cited earlier.

We can assume that Seidel maintained a powerful, yet highly ambivalent, tie to his mother throughout his entire life, and that the excessive sexual stimulation he received through continuing physical closeness to his younger sister left its own pervasive residue. Contrasted with the intense moral harshness on the part of both his parents, his inhibited sexual energies must have remained coupled with strong aggressive tendencies,

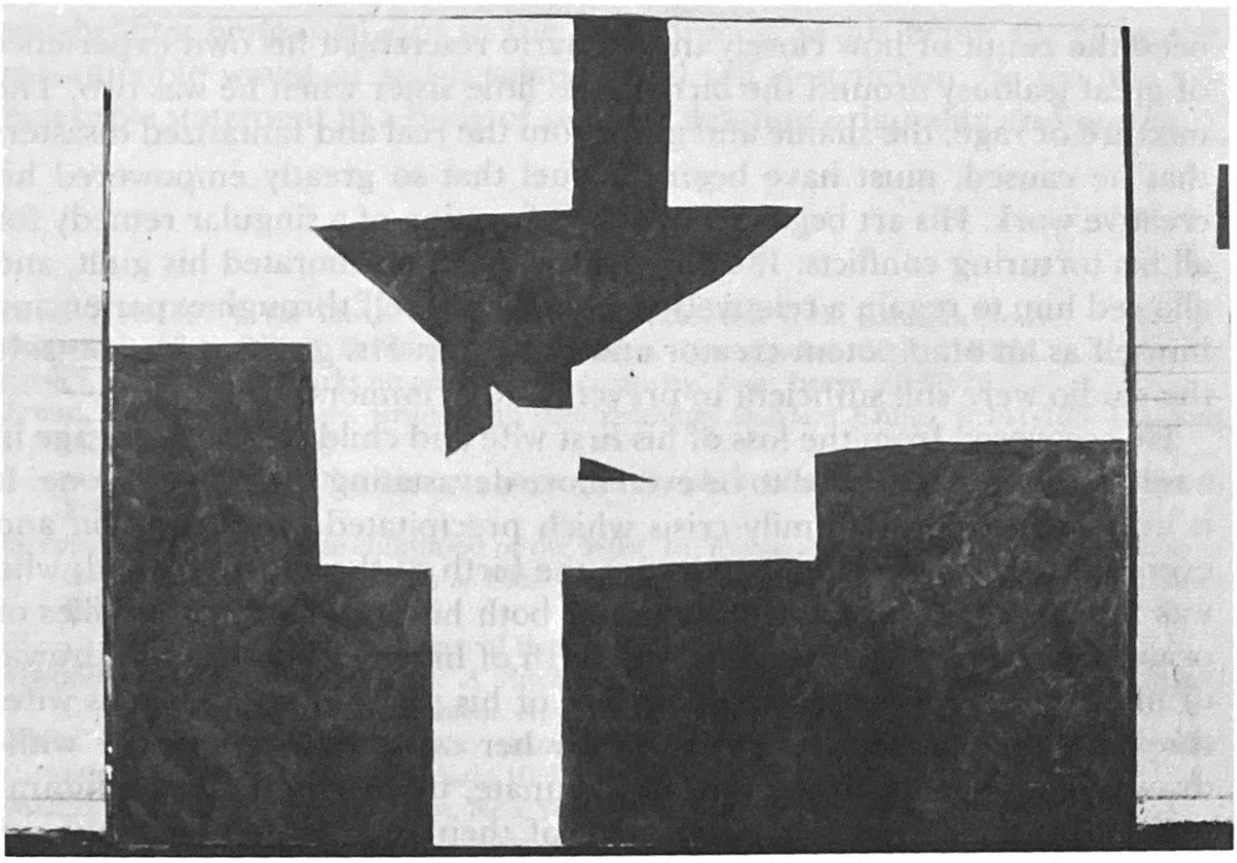

FIGURE 7. *Poem Destroyed* (Last painting), 1971.

particularly toward women. An early romantic idealization of his father might have been strong enough to extract the child from the overwhelming emotions he felt toward the female members of the family. But the father, drawn, perhaps, by the force of his own heritage of suicide, prevented a successful identification by vanishing into a mysterious death. Assuming that completed mourning is possible for a preadolescent, the ten-year-old Seidel might have overcome his father's death with less damage if he had not received the simultaneous evidence that his mother was equally unreliable. Remembering her collapse and departure when his father disappeared, we can only assume that this massive desertion forced him to resort to his own strength, and must have implanted an immense thirst for revenge.

The many mysterious events around the house during his adolescence, particularly the eerily familiar business of the suicide of his mother's lover, could have done nothing but reinforce his fear, guilt, and rage. However strong his angry impulses toward his parents might have been, they were certainly complemented by an equally strong need to repair what had been destroyed in fantasy.

The failure of his first marriage, following the birth of a son, could have

been the result of how closely this scenario resembled his own experience of great jealousy around the birth of his little sister when he was two. The mixture of rage, the shame and guilt from the real and fantasized disasters that he caused, must have been the fuel that so greatly empowered his creative work. His art began to serve the function of a singular remedy for all his torturing conflicts. It contained his rage, ameliorated his guilt, and allowed him to regain a relatively stable sense of self through experiencing himself as an omnipotent creator and destroyer. His gratifications outside the studio were still sufficient to prevent a total immersion in his art.

He recovered from the loss of his first wife and child only to reengage in a relationship that proved to be even more devastating than the first one. It is important that the family crisis which precipitated the separation and eventually the divorce occurred after the birth of their second child, who was female, replicating the structure of both his and his wife's families of origin. For Seidel, it represented the birth of his sister and the withdrawal of his mother, releasing all the violence of his pent-up rage. For his wife, the birth precipitated her yearning for her own mother, and her withdrawal from her husband. This unfortunate, ultimately tragic configuration led to the complete deterioration of their relationship: the cycle of rage-producing withdrawal, which, in turn, produced more rage, spiraled downward in an exhausting and unending course.

Seidel, unlike many more successful artists, had not found a stable fatherlike figure, even a patron/dealer under whose aegis he might have carried on with much more stamina. His first suicide attempt followed the brief but stormy reunion with his mother, followed by his separation from his second wife, and his lonely return to America. It was only after his "rescue" that psychotic elements complicated his world and contributed uniquely to his art. His paintings drawings, and writings became essentially the sole containers of his exceedingly painful struggle with life. His productivity increased dramatically, and his style expanded to display the elements of a most original creative mind, but it soon became clear that the magic of his art would cease to function once it would no longer lead to some concrete satisfactions and recognition in the world outside the studio. He began to decorate his grave-to-be—the studio—with all the memorable projections he could conjure up. Repeatedly he spilled his psychic guts not only on the canvases, but on the walls of his studio, gradually depleting himself, while creating a receptacle decorated with irretrievable parts of himself.

It was the irreversibility of his progressive evisceration, together with a dramatic cessation of all creative work, that led to the ultimate failure of his

self-healing endeavor. But in the very process of his being swept by the unstoppable waves of self-revelation and self-destruction, he made a remarkable statement in a body of work of dazzling originality and power.

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