

Name: H Kupracz

Student Number: 2304558

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Tutor: Alex Duncan

Question 4: From the series of FINE ART MAKING research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

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How artists have approached concepts around

‘the unconscious mind’

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How artists have approached concepts around

'the unconscious mind'

Introduction

The unconscious mind is an inevitable part of the creative world. The expanse of a human mind is intangible, from dwelling memories, and the manifestation of dreams, to the often unnoticed effect of unconscious bias. Louise Bourgeois and Michael Landy explored in their work the re-surfacing of memory through the active reflection on past experience, or through the interaction with sentimental objects, thus integrating an unconscious emotional response into the creation of their work. Julia Lockheart and Peter Birkhäuser furthered this exploration by directly responding to dreams, allowing the subconscious to direct the themes they explored. Surrealist artists have also used and recorded dream contents, whilst also engaging with practices of automatism. Dorothea Tanning and Leonor Fini were surrealists that expanded on the exploration of the unconscious, using it to highlight the subconscious fears and desires of women by challenging societal ideals within their approach to surrealism, exposing the effects of unconscious bias within society.

Memory as part of the unconscious mind:

Memory is an action people cannot control, and so it belongs to the unconscious mind; it is a reaction to witnessing existence. Artists in particular actively witness the progression and movement of existence, recording an observation with fascination. Yet all people form memories, and hold them dear to their hearts, or shove their memories into dark corners with a hope to forget. Gibbons commented on this phenomena, stating that “Memories that the unconscious mind cannot tolerate not only remain dormant, but continue to be organised and reorganized”. (Gibbons, 2019) Therefore memories within the unconscious mind can be re-expressed within forms of art, allowing a duality between reflection and creative impulse. “Memory is a social construct”, and so any reference is in itself a representation, rather than an actual externalisation, thus all artwork responding to past experiences and memories are contingent with “theories of simulacra” (Gibbons, 2019). Artworks of simulacrum thus allow for any representation to extend past expectations of reality, and so are able to more directly respond to the unconscious mind.

This is particularly prevalent within the work of Louise Bourgeois. Within ‘*Cell (Eyes and Mirrors)*’, Bourgeois reconstitutes and reconciles with her past, confronting ideas of fear and entrapment. The work itself presents an inherent reflectiveness beyond the mirrors used, where the marble eyes gaze at their own reflection, as well as out of the cage, meeting the eyes of any observers looking in. The work encourages an introspection that is almost voyeuristic. Thus this sense of unease confronts the viewer, enlarging the feeling of being watched, drawing back to the theme of fear that Bourgeois was exploring.



Figure 1: Louise Bourgeois, *Cell (Eyes and Mirrors)* (1989–93)

Cell (Eyes and Mirrors) could be approached as an autobiographical work as it is a reflection on the personal memories and past of Bourgeois, yet “memory is complexified by the conflation of past and present”, thus any recollections that are retrieved are dependent on what is felt in the present (Gibbons, 2019). Every response to Bourgeois’ artwork, both by herself and by others, is an unconscious interaction between memories and experience. In each moment there is a possibility for a new response to one’s past “Freud used the German word *Nachträglichkeit*, meaning the state or condition of being after the event or having hindsight”, which

highlights an unconscious and unavoidable change in perception over time, therefore also capturing the fleeting nature of memory (Colman, 2008).



Figure 2: Michael Landy, *Break Down* (2001)

Michael Landy has explored this futility of memory, within the 14 day long performance piece titled *Break Down*. Many belongings hold an association placed upon them, and so the destruction of such belongings can be an emotionally painful journey to go through. Sentiment clings onto material possessions, where the objects hold the power to re-surface memories from the past. Landy identifies this personal connection to physical items, and rejects them. He manually brings about the unavoidable yet premature end to all his belongings, mirroring the inevitable and unconscious warping of the past over time. Tone of loss and grief permeate his performance, yet it is also a rebellious comment of anti-consumerism, as well as a show of Landy's privilege. (Landy, 2008). Many are forced to give up their belongings

unwillingly due to conflict or poverty, and so this performance also highlights Landy's intersectional privilege as a cisgender white man born in London, and his financial stability in being able to choose to do such a performance of destruction. This factor does not remove the significance of Landy's artwork, but rather accompanies his presentation of unconscious degradation of memory, through his destruction of assigned sentiment.

Memory is unconsciously stored away in the human mind, and despite an unavoidable difficulty in recollection, they can re-surface unexpectedly through experiences such as the interaction with sentimental objects (as seen in Landy's work), or active reflection and emotionally strenuous experiences (as explored by Bourgeois). Memories can also be re-visited within dreams. Dreams allow glimpses into the past through a subconscious recollection of memories, which sometimes linger upon awakening. However dreams, just like memories, are destined to be subconsciously warped and mis-remembered upon awakening.

Dreams reflecting the unconscious mind.

The processing of events through dreams, allows for a reflection of the unconscious mind. We formulate new experiences during sleep, that are destined to be forgotten upon awakening. This world we step into every night creates a foothold for artists to explore the unconscious mind, both the wonderfully bizarre and hauntingly inescapable. The dreams that we have affect our waking lives, just as said by Shakespeare's character Prospero "We are such stuff as dreams are made on; and

our little life is rounded with a sleep." (Shakespeare, 1984), and so dreams act as a powerful and constant source of creative potential.

Julia Lockheart explores the unconscious mind in a series of work that was published in *The science and art of dreaming* (2023). These works are discussions of dream scenarios, that were painted directly onto the pages of Freud's *Interpretation of dreams* (1900). Within this publication Lockheart delves into the science behind dreams to support her artwork, explaining that "Dreams tend to refer to emotional experiences from waking life". Therefore artwork that is created as a response to dreams, is also work that is a response to memories of past experience. Lockheart's artworks have a reflective sense to them, despite being about other people's dreams, not her own. This is as she paints directly into the pages of a book, and so it conforms to a book formatting and sizing, like a visual diary. This makes the pages of her work able to interact with one another within the space of Freud's writings, creating a chronology of dream responses.



Figure 3: Julia Lockheart, *Dream of a robin scratching and pecking away Covid-19 from around the lungs* (2020)

Lockheart's '*Dream of a robin scratching and pecking away Covid-19 from around the lungs*' expresses a direct presentation of lived experience. Lockheart really brings forward the pain the coronavirus brought about, allowing the figure to be engulfed by the strong use of red. The integration of the text creates a downward spiralling effect that draws the viewer's eyes towards the robin at the bottom left, almost mirroring the emotional depressive spirals that so many went through during the imposed lockdowns. The separation of the text and the red also creates the impression of a ribcage and flesh, encouraging quite gruesome and dark tones to the piece, fitting the dream it is referencing, as well as the inner turmoil that was brought about within the dreamer's unconscious.

Lockheart further explores unrest within the unconscious through her artwork responding to nightmares, and theories surrounding their causation. Levin and Nelson presented a theory of why nightmares occur, they stated “that stressful and emotionally negative events can cause acquired fear memories” and proposed in their Affective Network Dysfunction model that “the fearful stimulus in dreams would cause the fear to diminish” and thus nightmares allow for the unavoidable reflection and acceptance of difficult past experiences (Levin, and Nielsen, 2007). Walker and Van der Helm agree with this theory, presenting that sleep has the function to “reduce our emotional reactivity when awake” (Walker, and van der Helm, 2009).



Figure 4: Peter Birkhäuser, *The World's Wound* (1953).

Unlike many of Julia Lockheart's work, Peter Birkhäuser depict the contents of his own dreams. The painting *'the world's wound'* was one of many depictions of the unconscious, yet this one overwhelms Birkhäuser's collective work with its uncanny eeriness. The image of man with the split face had haunted the artist's dreams for over four years. Despite this uncomfortable fact, Birkhäuser painted the man as neither angry nor particularly evil-looking, but rather as confrontational. His eyes pierce past the fabric of the canvas to meet the viewer's gaze, it is this unexpected judgement that brings about a sense of unease to the painting. Birkhäuser believed that it was the overwhelming input of the unconscious within this piece, as "reactions and healing impulses of the autonomous psyche" encouraged a very human, yet inevitable curious discomfort. Birkhäuser believed that a disconnect to our unconscious mind was growing larger in response to the progression of modern society, and explored extensively this "spiritual predicament" of current times extensively within his work, such as within *'the world's wound'*, but also within *'Lynx'* (1976), *'At the Door'* (1965) and *'Fire give Birth'* (1959-1960), to name a few (Wertenschlag-Birkhäuser, 2008). Birkhäuser was perceptive in his judgment of society for a reduction of spiritual connection, or even a simply a reduced connection to the present, with screens and media acting as visual pacifiers in everyday life. His work ultimately represents the "sufferings of our age as reflected in the collective unconscious" (The Door of Perception, 2022).

Birkhäuser's work mirrors the approach and outcomes often seen within the surrealist movement, with the same attributes of dream reflection. Surrealist artists such as Andre Breton, and Dorothea Tanning created works that were a response to dreams and thoughts buried within the unconscious mind, creating collections of work that reflected their subconscious.

Surrealism and automatism

The fascinating phenomena of dreams has peaked the curiosity throughout history, with particular prominence within the surrealist movement. Within the surrealist manifesto Andre Breton states that "Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought "(Breton, 1924). Surrealists focused on recording the contents of dreams, and welcomed their unconscious episodes of confounding strangeness.



Figure 5: Dorothea Tanning, *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (1943)

Dorothea Tanning also explored the unconscious and was part of the surrealist movement. However Tanning's intersectionality of being a woman and a surrealist artist, resulted in a further exploration into the unconscious mind. Rather than simply depicting her own dreams within paintings as Breton did, Tanning portrayed dreams as "the manifestation of repressed, unconscious thoughts" exploring themes of fear, desire, and sexuality, and thus she also "subverts the sexist tropes of the femme fatal" (Margutti et al., 2022). Tanning rebelled against the roles of inferiority forced upon women within the surrealist discourse, actively refusing any sexualisation or objectification of the characters she portrayed. Instead, the figures within her paintings are given agency, confronting the viewers rather than being confronted. Within the work '*Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*', there are two figures engaging with an aggressive, overgrown sunflower. This sunflower acts as a victim within the work, with the two girls removing petals and towering over its limp form. The setting is that of a hotel corridor with crimson carpets that challenge the sharp yellows of the sunflower. Overall the piece provokes a discomfort, where shadows and ajar doors bring about an unease, yet the two girls in the image seem confident in their confrontation of their issue of the sunflower. This is a scene of rebellion and suffocation, where the sunflower acts as a representation of subjective fears, and projections of the imagination. The figures confront their fears, just as we must confront our "own private nightmares" (Carruthers, 2010).

Unconscious bias.

Much of the work of male surrealists stems from the acceptance of the Freudian unconscious, leading them to explore ideas surrounding contents of dreams and an unconscious reality. However for women this exploration into the unconscious can be taken further, where their presented inferiority to men within a patriarchal society, actions a response to unconscious bias. Surrealists such as Tanning and Fini used surrealism to “break through the conscious’s mind restrictive control”, allowing them to explore “desires and obsessions lodged in the unconscious” (Chadwick, 1991).



Figure 6: Leonor Fini, *L'élue de la nuit* (1986)

Fini refused to depict any woman as subordinate or submissive to men within her art, which led to outrage from critics, who in response viewed her work as “polemical statements” (Chadwick, 1991). Within her work, Fini explores the appreciation of the female form by another woman, allowing her work to naturally respond to the stereotypical depiction of women by men, and confront the societal norm of sexualisation and objectification of others.

Gender based prejudice will always be significant within the surrealist movement, where the works of the surrealists artists’ male counter-parts, such as Dali and Breton, took precedence within art history. Throughout western culture women are often presented as vulnerable and needing protection, and it is such infantilizing “beliefs that are used as a justification for limiting the social roles permitted to women” (Kite, *et al.* 2023) . Despite a progression in the equality between men and women, “the apparent inevitability of prejudice” will always have an impact within society through the inescapability of unconscious bias, stemming from society’s need to form categorizations (Kite, *et al.* 2023) .

Conclusion:

The importance of artists challenging social norms and exploring the unconscious mind, both in past artistic movements and in contemporary works, will always be significant. The human need to reflect on past memories (such as in Bourgeois and Landy’s work) and have dreams (as explored by Lockheart, Birkhäuser, and within the surrealist movement) will act as a constant catalyst for artwork to respond to the

unconscious mind. Such work can highlight the lingering thoughts and fears of many, allowing for a retrospection that encourages growth and change within society, as seen within the works of Tanning and Fini. The exploration within art, of unconscious beliefs and fears, can bring to light social imbalances and unconscious bias. The unconscious mind is a constant and integral part of the creative world.

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