

Design as a Symbolic enactment in the Real Life of innovation projects

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The Conference title appealed to me because it is relating Design Thinking with New Challenges and Change. It is referring to notions I deal with in my Consulting and coaching practice and also it refers to my Expressive Art Therapy activity. This is the reason why I will back up this presentation from various authors linked with psychoanalysis and art-therapy.

Though such an approach may be seen as transverse, it seems to me relevant to design prevailing preoccupations.

The process in art therapy and especially in dance therapy is based on the recognition that's human being most fundamentals thoughts and feelings, derived from the unconscious. This gap between conscious and unconscious is supposed to be bridged during dedicated workshops.

Is this connection between inner and outer world effective during any creative process? Is it appropriate to design thinking?

Designers sometimes are testifying that they feel frustrated when involved in multi disciplinary innovation projects because they feel that their creative process is misunderstood.

In an attempt to explore what is the nature of their creative experience, I propose here to ponder upon the following questions:

Could we identify special conditions or pre requisites under which human beings would be eligible to be creative? Is creating a symbolic experiment or an enactment in the real? Is it possible to create a new world made of original objects?

A – Interplaying between two worlds

If asked to give a precise definition of creativity, I usually quote Carl Rogers who gives a comprehensive definition in his book, 'Towards a theory of creativity': 'The creative process is that it is the emergence in action of the individual on the one hand, and the materials, events, people or circumstances of his life on the other'. (1)

The creative process is not a still process but rather a dynamic bringing something new in existence and which functions like an 'underground reservoir, which flows beneath the obvious and apparent everyday level of things'. (2)

I will hold to Daria Halprin definition of the Creative process: 'circular, meandering, sometimes rather fragmented' the creative process forms '**a bridge between our inner life and vision and our outer expression in the world**'. (3)

In this lecture, I will identify creativity as 'the expression of normal people in the act of actualizing themselves. '(4) enabling them to adapt themselves and cope with change coming from the outer world.

In that way we may say that 'There is nothing that is outside creativity territory' (5)

Restricting myself on the conditions to meet a creative life and creative experience, I will concentrate here on the work of a renowned British paediatrician and psychoanalyst **Donald Woods Winnicott** (April 1896 – January 1971) who achieved an international recognition in the fifties.

D. W. Winnicott gave an invaluable contribution to the understanding of adolescence and child development and from his works; I will underline several concepts which are echoing to questions related to creation and creative life.

D. W. Winnicott thought that the experience of creativity was not limited to artistic activity and explained that from our early life we are accustomed to be confronted to a special interspaced position between our outer and inner world, which varies 'greatly from individual to individual' (6) . 'It is outside the individual, but it is not the external world' (7) where creating becomes possible as a **symbolic enactment**.

D. W. Winnicott having a conversation with Marion Milner in 1969 (1900 – 1998) - painter, art-therapist and psychoanalyst- was comforted on the importance of interplay as a base for creation. 'There can be in the interplay of the edges of two curtains, or of the surface of a jug that is placed in front of another jug'. (8)

It seems, according to Marion Milner that Creative process **will exist not really inside, not really outside but somewhere in between, interspaced.**

Common interplay is the foundation of our self and personal creative process. Therefore, the interplay implies the existence of an inside and an outside, a supporting base with a 'limiting membrane'. (9) An interplay where can be found a 'mix of conscious attention with absent-mindedness'. (10)

B – Falling in with the Real World

When giving themselves permissions to create, individuals will deal simultaneously with internal and external reality, meeting the true root of the notion of the real. In Winnicott's mind a healthy individual is one who feels real and whole.

The notion of the **real is about being alive, creative, spontaneous, and playful.** The individual, Winnicott believes is in a constant struggle to distinguish fantasy from fact, external from psychic reality, the world from the dream.

To summarize we may assert that the capacity to create is a search of balance between the reality of the world, what already exists and the capacity of imagination and illusion, and fantasy.

Winnicott's works show us that the capacity to create is a result of a paradox from an early stage of human development. In the early time of our human lives, we meet some undeniable phases in our development. These steps are relevant because they gradually allow the infant to get the conditions on which he will become a mature human being, according to that 'health is maturity, maturity appropriate to the age'. (11) Mature has to be understood from a psychological point of view.

C - Starting a human life: the end of illusion

D. W. Winnicott described in great subtlety the nature of relationships beginning with that of mother and infant.

He underlines the key role played by what he defined as an adaptive ‘good enough mother’ (12) in the child’s development: thanks to an optimal environment, the infant will ‘become capable of mature object relations’ (13) into a social world, **the ‘real world’**.

At an early stage the infant and the mother live in a merged couple, with the consequence that the baby considers he/she is all-powerful. During the stage of relative dependence, the mother provides the illusion that the baby has the omnipotence power to create precisely what it desires.

Living in a **temporary illusion** (14) gives the baby the sense of subjective omnipotence (15) which experiences the baby enjoys very much: the idea of magic originates there.

As baby matures, her mother begins to recede. At that time, the baby realizes that there is an outside world, a distinct and objective reality, which is not always there to fulfil his desires.

Then an external reality principle ‘substitutes for the illusion: the difference between ‘me’ and ‘not me’ clarifies’. (16)

Obviously, relinquishing the subjective omnipotence is a painful end for magical illusion. Accepting reality occurs to be a hard job and Winnicott declares that exposure to reality is an insult!

The insult of the reality principle is tolerated and non traumatic only because playing and creativity and symbols are filling the space between mother and infant allowing them to remain united though being separated.

From D. W. Winnicott’s perspective, **illusion is an important positive aspect of human involvement in the world of experience.**

Illusion is an area of experiencing that exists as a ‘resting place’ for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated’. Its origins lie in the intermediate state between the baby’s inability and growing ability to recognize and accept reality.

The illusion that fills this ‘potential space’ is the **first paradox in every human being’s life.**

D – Experiencing the paradox

Winnicott highlights the transition between a state of union with the mother, to the state of relation with her: this specific relation is not actually **a separation but a form of union**.

It is the beginning for the little child of the experience of a relationship to external reality: a middle ground between the objective reality, the real world (the ‘not-me’) and the subjective omnipotence (the ‘me’) where can be found creativity and further the possibility to live a creative life.

This specific relation about a separation which is not actually a separation but a form of union, takes place in what Donald Winnicott delineates as a ‘potential area’ an intermediate area of experiencing an ‘area that is allowed to the infant between primary creativity and objective perception based on reality-testing.’ (17)

E – ‘Creating’ the first symbol

In the transitional experience, Winnicott underlines the apparition of the ‘transitional object’ to which every parent remembers of: This object, a teddy bear, a blanket, a bit of cloth, can be referred to a first not –me possession: ‘Representing the mother when she is absent to feel connected to her.’ (18) This object without which the infant could not conceive of going to bed!

Parents get to know the value of the transitional object and carry it round when travelling. Let it get dirty and smelly. Any parent won’t wash it, otherwise they understand that they will introduce a break in the continuity in the infant experience. This break may destroy the meaning and value of the object to the infant.

The baby uses various objects as steps toward the symbolic function. The successful use of symbols indicates that the child has obtained the capacity to **distinguish fantasy from fact**, internal from external. He has the ability to recognize and accept reality.

The transitional object is a fantasy. It is the first symbolic process of experiencing the detachment, the separation and further the mourning of a relation.

The transitional object illustrates that one difficulty every child experiences is to relate subjective reality to shared reality which is objectively perceived.

Transitional objects and phenomena enable the child to stand frustrations and deprivations and to cope with new situations.

When a **child is deprived** with no object of this kind, or having lost it, he/she has no way out, apart from a split in his/her personality. 'When the bridge between the subjective and objective is destroyed, or have never been well-formed, the **child is unable to operate as a total human being**'. (19)

Obviously this child would not be cured simply by giving him/her a new object.

The potential space happens only in relation to a feeling of confidence on the part of the baby.

The mother and to some extent, the father and any subrogate mother-figure are designed to inscribe the baby into a symbolic function, giving access to social bonding. **Deprived** from any symbolic mental activity, the child **lacks the capacity of escaping from the real**. Such a child and later when becoming an adolescent he will only 'enact in the real' with possible aggressive and antisocial enactments.

The reality is that the world is never as we would create it: so the stake is for all of us to **have sufficient overlap of external reality and what we can create**. The paradox is that what we call the real emanates primarily from our inner reality,

F - Playing and creating: Feeling real

Playing and creating are natural for every individual and are not to be dissociated in 'something that belongs properly to infant experience: the ability to create the world' (20)

It is in playing that the individual child or adult is able 'to use the whole personality and it is only in being creative that the individual discover the self' (21) This does not mean that only successful artists have an access to their self. 'The finished creation never heals the underlying lack of sense of the self. '(22)

The use of the symbol depends on the feeling of being real and experiencing objects reality. It means that when the infant can use symbol he/she reaches a **step which is a crucial point for the concept of being**: it allows the integration of a personal pronoun 'I' that makes possible 'I am', which makes sense of 'I do.' (23) 'This occurs to be the establishment of an autonomous self at the initial stage.' (24)

As the psychoanalyst Masud Khan asserts that we can't communicate directly from the self and neither be directly related to symbolic forms he rejoins both Winnicott's declaration 'The self is as much created by its symbols, as expressed by them' and Milner's work, stating that 'The self experience is intimately related to body-ego.' (25)

Along with others psychiatrists of his generation, Donald Winnicott worked on the definition of the 'self' or 'ego' and he makes us discover the differences between false and true self.

When the true self is instinctive and occurs to be the true core of the personality, enacting spontaneously, the false self on the opposite reacts to environmental demands. Each person has a polite or socialized self, and also a personal private self that is not available except in intimacy. Most children become able to accept a false self: A sort of 'dishonesty as a price to pay for socialization.' (26)

Unfortunately, it happens that the environment is not 'good enough': At this step the failure restrains the capacity of the baby of using illusion and the establishment of a personal capacity for creative living. Under such a condition appears a false self who is reactive, in compliancy and out of the reality.

Living with a false self leads to the sense of not being alive: In fact, the person has a poor symbolic life. Individuals are in extreme restlessness, inability to concentrate, and a need to react to the demands of the external reality.

G - Feeling free

It is a perpetual task for individuals to keep the inner and outer reality separate and at the same time interrelated.

We can compare life process to an **hourglass**: as one bulb is internal reality the other bulb is external reality. One feels most alive and real and free when one is not boxed in by either inner or outer. The only way to avoid being boxed in is to sustain an unending dialectic between inner and outer.

To keep the image of the hourglass we can assert that a life that feels real is experienced in the narrow area of convergence here the sand flows in both directions.

'Fantasy is only tolerable at full blast **when objective reality is appreciated well and when we are poor if we are only sane**'! (27)

How this could take place in the creative process. Marion Milner (1900 – 1998) - painter, art-therapist and psychoanalyst- described the difficulty of allowing a 'not-knowing' with an 'empty headedness'. (28)

People engaged in the creative process would testify 'an extension of the body into space' an "internal gesture of the mind, a kind of inner stepping back in order to allow an inner space to open up inside oneself" the material emerges spontaneously out of the unconscious. These experiences may be found in the Marion Milner's book 'A life of one's own' that she first published in 1934 under a pseudonym Joanna Field.

Obviously, creators may feel under enormous strain in trying to hold together some disparate elements, attempting to make inner and outer world connected. Sometimes, out of this trail, they would report that they feel they have lost.

When creating, the individual is in a state ‘in which the individual is able to flounder, to be without orientation, to exist without needing to either act or react.

During dance-therapy workshops, through their improvised movements and gestures, attendees testify afterward that interspersed area becomes the space for exploration and free movement: people involved feel they may find an original way of expressing themselves. At a sudden, creation exists spontaneously emerging from the inner world to the outer time and space.

H- Creating new and fresh: revising the inside world

I would like here to underline the role played by Marion Milner, because she refers to the following question in 1955: Is change possible? Can something new and original be made?

She begins her own experience as a painter and she realized that painter’s feelings could be conveyed through spatial representations and that artistic skills though learnt in the external world are a kind of revisions from the inside world.

‘Creating what has never been seen’ (29) acted upon like a controversy whether one is merely re-making what one has previously had, but lost, or whether it is a creation on the basis of new insight coming from the interaction of conscious and unconscious modes from the inner world.

What may seem **truly original can be a mere illusion**, from Marion Milner’s point of view: from her painting experience she stated that what we create is already there so that we never create anything new.

To summarize a creating situation involves an implicit paradox, a tacit understanding which has ‘to be accepted, not resolved.’ (30)

‘The baby creates the object: but the object was there waiting to be created... in the rule of the game we all know that we will never challenge the baby to elicit an answer to the question: did you create that or did you find it? (31)

One can say that designed objects surrounding our life did not appear ex nihilo. Creators are fertilized by the trends of the time and space they belong to. Are not we always embodying our imaginary and fantasy in frames which assign to us? For instance, Christopher Columbus is a 'discoverer' who witnessed his own time and space. He has inscribed in uncharted territories a fancied world made of beliefs, fantasy and bestiaries proper to this Renaissance period.

We can report that designers are **listening and reporting the trends** of our current world. They are accustomed to focus themselves and therefore be evaluated on the originality content of their creations. Being more aware of the unknown, could be a good way of going deeper in a personal experience of one's creative process. That means that scrutinizing what may seem to be a kind of 'magic place' enables to go deeper in an authentic and therefore original expression.

At the opposite, one could feel anxious as if becoming more conscious of things would make the process vanished like under a spell.

We have to pay heed to the fact that every human being from various cultures is sharing a similar creative experience. In this, shall we identify that a cross-pollination is likely to happen? The 'potential space' as a play area becomes the location for cultural experience because playing 'leads into shared playing and into groups' relationships, and from this to cultural experiences' (32) This helps us to acknowledge that personal corresponding intermediate areas are easily overlapping, that is to say a common experience between members of a group like in art or religion or philosophy.

These fundamentals help us to understand further shared communication and spontaneous understanding between individuals. And to go further, as designers are required to anticipate and produce objects for a space and time which do not exist yet, it could be precious for them to ponder upon the fact that creating, playing and cultural experience 'link the past, the present, and the future; they take up time and space'. (33)

From this, we would induce that it could be easy to get through relationships and communication difficulties within multi disciplinary projects teams.

I - To bring to a conclusion

Starting from the assumption that the key role for human beings is to run a creative life must not be taken for granted. Human beings seem to need some precise conditions to succeed in: D.W. Winnicott's approach brings us operative points of view and concepts.

Being able to create symbols – as a transitional space and a first symbolic object – occurs to work as fundamental steps in our life.

Symbolic activity may seem to be an ultimate and sophisticated activity, well adapted to some artistic and philosophical outputs. Though not being conscious of this movement, in our current life, we are always dealing with two components, symbols and reality which are interrelated.

In D. W. Winnicott's works can be found original ways for identifying new answers in facilitating and supporting designers in their challenges for the future.

Designers have an ability to focus on borders: it seems that limits are appealing and challenging them. Perhaps, it reminds them of a kind of nostalgic 'potential space' where they can provoke the overlapping of fantasy with the real. As we know that creative process works as a symbolic enactment always reiterated from a first symbol.

D. W. Winnicott says 'I am thinking of something that is in the common pool of humanity, into which individuals and groups of people may contribute, and from which we may all draw if we have somewhere to put what we find' (34)

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