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[Revisiting Ernst Kris's Concept of Regression in the Service of the Ego in Art](#)  
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This article attempts a critical reexamination of the usefulness of Ernst Kris's concept regression in the service of the ego. Although the term was initially welcomed and applied to many psychological and creative phenomena, it was later criticized and, eventually, disappeared in the literature. Regression in creativity is allotted a central place, and it is argued that one must depathologize the concept of regression as well as expand its terminology to reflect advances in object relations theory. Regression that takes place in artmaking, and in the aesthetic response to it, is compared with regression that takes place in psychoanalytic treatment.

Art of the highest caliber pushes beyond totality towards a state of fragmentation.

—T. W. Adorno

Genius is nothing more nor less than childhood recovered at will.

—Baudelaire

When Picasso exclaimed that he used to draw like Raphael, but that it took him an entire lifetime to learn to draw like a child, he was referring to his hard-earned capacity to retrieve and use a perspective marked by simplicity,

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freshness, and even primitiveness in the service of his art. Psychoanalyst Ernst Kris has called this tendency regression in the service of the ego.

The concept of regression in the service of the ego was initially welcomed, especially by psychologists who searched for its manifestations in projective test protocols (e.g., Bellak, 1954/1973; Schachtel, 1959; Schafer, 1958), and by others for whom it proposed to clarify the popular mythology of the mad artist. It was later viewed as problematic by some and even dismissed by others. In recent years, regression in the service of the ego is hardly mentioned in the literature.

I would like to attempt a critical reexamination of the usefulness of the term in light of recent knowledge about the artist, the creative process, and developments in object relations theory. Regression will be considered from the following perspectives: temporal regression (a return to earlier stages of psychosexual development—i.e., infantilism or childishness), regression as risking decompensation (i.e., playing with boundaries of self, identity, and reality), and topographical and structural regression (i.e., freer access to visual and primary process modes of thought). Naturally, these three types of regression overlap and they do not exclude regression that is not necessarily part of the creative process or in its service. Regression in art will be compared to and contrasted with the regression that takes place in psychoanalysis. Especially relevant is Loewald's (1960/1980) claim, in his classic paper "On the

Therapeutic Action of Psychoanalysis,” that movement in treatment is achieved by “the promotion and utilization of [controlled] regression” (p. 224).

Because of my interest and writings in the psychology of creativity, many patients in the creative arts have been referred to me for treatment, which has offered me the opportunity to examine the complexities of the creative mind. I have also taught a course on the psychology of the artist at a variety of academic institutions. Each year, I invite artists who work in a variety of media to my class to speak about themselves and their work. I have conducted approximately 60 interviews with artists over the years. My findings are therefore based on three types of data obtained over 18 years of research: firsthand communication with artists through classroom interviews or therapy; study of artists and their works; and personal interviews with artists. This article will be accompanied by quotations from well-known artists, patients, and interviewees to illustrate its major points.

I shall first present a review of Kris's concept of regression in the service of the ego, after which I shall summarize the major criticism it has received. Then I will discuss regression in art and offer several illustrations, after which I will present an object relations approach to the understanding

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of regression in the service of the ego. Finally, I will discuss the regression that takes place in observers of art.

### **Ernst Kris and Regression in the Service of the Ego**

In 1936, Ernst Kris (1936/1952c) first introduced the concept regression in the service of the ego in his paper on “The Psychology of Caricature.”

We have now to elucidate in greater detail the relations of wit and caricature to dreams: in dreams, the ego abandons its supremacy and the primary process obtains control, whereas in wit and caricature the process remains in the service of the ego. This formulation alone suffices to show that the problem involved is a more general one; the contrast between an ego overwhelmed by regression and a “regression in the service of the ego”—*si licet venia verbo*—covers a vast and imposing range of mental experience. (p. 177)

In his 1952 book, *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, Kris (1952d) published his theory of creativity in which regression in the service of the ego assumed a pivotal position. He relied on three separate sources in his elaboration of the concept: first, Freud's (1905/1960) theory of wit, in which he explains how a preconscious thought is “given over for a moment to unconscious revision” (p. 166); second, Freud's statement that artists are endowed with a “flexibility (looseness, *Lockerheit*) of repression” (1917/1963, p. 376); and third, ego psychology's emphasis on the adaptive functions of the ego. The major focus of Kris's formulations on creativity therefore deals with shifts in psychic levels (primary-secondary process) and cathexes of ego functions (inspiration—elaboration). The assumption here initially appears to be paradoxical; while the ego suspends its control by a temporary withdrawal of cathexis, it simultaneously controls and regulates the regression that is taking place. The control of ego functions, however, is one that varies with regard to “the organizational functions of the ego, its capacity of self-regulation of regression and particularly to its capacity of control over the primary process” (Kris, 1952b, p. 28). Kris describes the creative process as composed of two phases, each of which involves a shift in psychic level and a corresponding shift in the cathexis of certain ego functions. During the first inspirational phase, the artist is passively receptive to

id impulses or their derivatives. Kris describes this phase as having much in common with regressive processes in that id impulses and drives, otherwise hidden and unavailable, emerge to communicate with the ego. During this phase, the artist experiences rapture

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and a feeling of being driven by external forces. (This is very frequently encountered in writers who describe their characters as taking over and dictating what they write.) The second elaborational phase calls for the artist's active use of such ego functions as reality testing, formulation, and communication. This phase resembles work or problem solving in that it entails concentration and purposeful organization. What was originally communicated to the passively receptive ego is now actively elaborated and communicated to others. According to Kris, the inspirational phase donates the content to an artwork whereas the elaboration phase is primarily responsible for the transformation of that content into communicable form, communication being the primary purpose of art. These phases may follow each other in swift or slow succession or may be interwoven with one other.

A continual interplay between inspiration (regression) and elaboration (criticism) takes place during the creative process and the degree to which an artist's work represents mainly one or the other of these tendencies constitutes the major difference, in Kris's view, between normal and psychotic art. For instance, if regression predominates, the symbols used in the artwork are egocentric and take on private meaning; however, if there is too much control, the work of art will appear "cold, mechanical and uninspired" (Kris, 1952a, p. 254). Whereas Kris views art as having developed from magical ritual into a form of communication, he believes psychotic art deteriorates from communication back to sorcery. Because the ego plays a minimal part in psychotic creations, the insane artist, like the dreamer, does not control his or her regression but, rather, becomes overwhelmed by it. And, like a dream, the psychotic product only becomes intelligible with the aid of interpretation. In its attempt to transform the external world, Kris believes the art of psychotics serves a restitutive function rather than a communicative one. (This view is challenged by Kleinians who postulate that the purpose of all art, not merely psychotic art, is reparative.)

Kris's theory of art has been widely criticized for the central position it attributes to the regressive function in creative activity (Arieti, 1976; Ehrenzweig, 1967; Gedo, 1983; Weissman, 1967). This is mostly because regressive processes in adults are usually thought to imply pathological mental functioning. Regression, even when it is in the service of the ego, claims Rose (1980), has a depreciative connotation. Weissman also argues that Kris's use of the term regression when speaking of creativity produces a "terminological disadvantage [that] detracts from an evaluation of the positive and strong developmental aspects of ego functioning in creative activity"

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(Weissman, 1971, p. [402](#)). Weissman proposes a desynthesizing or dissociative function of the ego, which he claims more accurately describes the ego's functioning during creative activity. It could be argued that Weissman's alternative term, involving a dissociative ego, implies no less pathology than does Kris's. Noy (1969)

simply calls regression in the service of the ego a misnomer, and Nass (1984) maintains that the capacity to experience and tolerate early modes of functioning requires a strong ego rather than a regressed one. Again, one could reason that a strong ego is, in fact, one that is partly defined by the flexibility of its various functions. For example, the ego must be able to relax its controls to allow sufficient regression necessary for sleep.

I agree with Anna Freud's (1963/1969) claim that the concept of regression needs not only to be disassociated from pathology; it must also be appreciated as a necessary component of normal development. In fact, Freud (1900/1953) originally referred to the regressive movement from motor to visual sensations, which takes place in dream life, as a universal phenomenon. Peter Blos (1962; 1967) has also called attention to the normative regression in the service of development that takes place ubiquitously in adolescence. Geleerd (1964), too, writes of adaptive regression in adolescence. I believe that it is no coincidence that dreams and adolescence have often been linked to creativity. Both of these phenomena involve normative regressive trends that simultaneously result in expanded creative potential. From Freud (1900/1953) onward, we know to distinguish dreams from creative products, even though they have many elements in common (e.g., use of symbols, condensation) and are at times used as sources of creative inspiration (e.g., Samuel Coleridge's poem "Kubla Khan"). And, though the large majority of adolescent art does not achieve public recognition, adolescents are nevertheless well known for their romantic predilections and creative productivity. I therefore think that it is not far-fetched to assume that at least part of the creative process, like that in dreams and adolescence, involves regression which is not necessarily accompanied by, or the result of, pathology.

I would like to suggest that the concept of regression in the service of the ego has not outlived its usefulness, particularly as it applies to the arts. All of the artists I have studied or worked with have readily discussed regressive forces at work, to a greater or lesser degree, in their creativity. I am obliged to conclude, therefore, that much of the reluctance to recognize regression as an integral force in creativity derives not so much from artists but, rather, from psychoanalysts who appear fearful of assessing the artist or the art product in the same way they do the patient and his

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or her symptom. It is possible that these fears date back to the time when Freud was fiercely criticized for comparing the artist with the neurotic and the creative product with a neurotic symptom (Bell, 1925; Fry, 1924). In any case, it is interesting that these hesitations are not present in papers on the regression that takes place in psychoanalysis, papers in which many authors (Galler, 1981; Loewald, 1981; Tuttmann, 1979) recognize the hybrid quality of regression's potential for both pathological deterioration and reorganization or integration.

Although I am in favor of retaining Kris's term, I agree that there exists a lack of clarity and specificity with which his concept is sometimes used. Furthermore, most descriptions of regression in the service of the ego originate in ego psychological theory, a theory whose popularity has waned since 1970 (Blum, 1998) and whose terminology, focusing on energetic and structural formulations, is perceived as experience distant.

I propose to move beyond its descriptive nature to specify the particular genetic and dynamic factors responsible for the existence and development of such a capacity. I also wish to update the term by expanding its usage beyond that belonging solely to

drive and ego psychology. Regression in the service of the ego, therefore, will be considered as the ability to maintain contact with early body and self states and with early forms of object relationships, as well as with different modes of thinking. It is argued that the relationship artists have with their work is a form of object relationship, and creative work allows for reenactments with early objects. Artists use their art as vehicles for transformation and change, both within themselves (their egos) and without (the art product). These points will be elaborated later.

### **Regression in Art**

In 1895 Paul Gauguin wrote, “I wielded the ax furiously and my hands were covered with blood as I cut with the pleasure of brutality appeased, of the destruction of I know not what.... All the old residue of my civilized emotions utterly destroyed” (Kuspit, 1993, p. 3). Gauguin is indeed the prototypical artist who not only adopted a primitive form of art; he also left his bourgeois life in Paris to live among “primitives” in Tahiti. He wrote,

I am leaving in order to have peace and quiet, to be rid of the influence of civilization. I only want to do simple, very simple art, and to be able to do that. I have to immerse myself in virgin nature, see no one but savages, live their life.

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with no other thought in mind but to render, the way a child would, the concepts formed in my brain and to do this with the aid of nothing but the primitive means of art, the only means that are good and true. (Kuspit, 1993, p. 8)

To be sure, many twentieth-century artists, like Gauguin, Picasso, Dubuffet (champion of “Art Brut”), Modigliani, Klee, Miro, and those belonging to the Surrealist, Dada, Neoprimativism, and Naive movements, are known for their purposeful use of childhood perspectives in art, perspectives that, in most of us, have become eroded by time. These sophisticated artists consciously adopt species of primitive or childhood art to achieve spontaneity unaffected by reason. One such artist, Paul Klee, expressed this desire when he claimed, “I want to be as though new-born, knowing nothing” (Fleming, 1968, p. 522). Indeed, whereas Klee's art possesses the casual quality of doodles or impulsive improvisations, it is imperative not to forget that it also involves an ever-present mastery over line and color. Unpretentiousness should not be confused with carelessness or lack of control. Playfulness is one of the qualities that distinguish this type of art. Klee's art is filled with humor and wit, as is that of Juan Miro. The whimsical side of life is presented in Miro's titles, as in *Persons Magnetized by the Stars Walking on the Music of a Furrowed Landscape*. Furthermore, both Klee and Kirchner are known to have included samples of their childhood drawings alongside mature ones to demonstrate the link between the two (Douglas, 1996).

Whereas these artists adopt childlike modes in their art, others represent regression to childhood or infantile states in the content and form of their work. For example, Frida Kahlo, whose oeuvre consists primarily of a series of self-portraits, not only painted herself nursing at the breast of her wet nurse; she depicted the scene of her own birth—in her words, “the way I imagine I was born”—in which she emerges from between her mother's spread legs. In a similar vein, the art of Ana Mendieta, a Cuban-American artist, deals with the undifferentiated state between mother and self. Mendieta is best known for her earth works, all of which use her own body or its silhouette. The impermanence of most of the materials she used—soil, sand, gunpowder, flame, fiber—reflects the transient nature of the primary subject of her

work: the ephemeral bonding with the mother. Mendieta was clearly aware of the psychological sources of her artwork when she wrote the following:  
I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette). I believe this has been a direct result of my having been torn from my homeland (Cuba) during my adolescence. I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art

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is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source. Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth.... I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body. This obsessive act of reasserting my ties with the earth is really the reactivation of primeval beliefs ... [in] an omnipresent female force, the afterimage of being encompassed within the womb, is a manifestation of my thirst for being. (Barreras del Rio & Perrault, 1988, p. 10)

Mendieta literally grounded herself in each new site, thereby becoming not only a figure within the ground, but also a grounded figure. Her art depicts the blurring of boundaries between self and object by joining figure and ground, thereby representing the longed-for symbiotic reunion of mother-ground and child-figure (Knafo, 1996). The obvious question that emerges from the examination of these works of art concerns the reasons why artists represent regression to childhood modes of expression and experience. One self-evident answer to the appeal childhood has for artists involves a desire to recapture the ability to look at the world with awe and a sense of wonder, what Baudelaire calls the “animally ecstatic gaze of the child confronted with something new” (quoted in Kuspit, 1988, p. 45). Additional explanations can be found in the claims of developmental theories that the world of the infant and young child is imbued with a dynamic sense of physical and emotional involvement; knowing and feeling are not yet differentiated, and even inanimate objects are experienced as vital and alive. André Breton (1924/1972) perhaps said it best when he wrote in his “Manifesto of Surrealism”:

The mind which plunges into Surrealism relives with glowing excitement the best part of its childhood. For such a mind, it is similar to the certainty with which a person who is drowning reviews once more, in the space of less than a second, all the insurmountable moments of his life. Some may say to me that the parallel is not very encouraging. But I have no intention of encouraging those who tell me that. From childhood memories, and from a few others, there emanates a sentiment of being unintegrated, and then later of having gone astray, which I hold to be the most fertile that exists. It is perhaps childhood that comes closest to one's “real life”; childhood beyond which man has at his disposal, aside from his *laissez passer*, only a few complimentary tickets; childhood where everything nevertheless conspires to bring about the effective, risk-free possession of oneself. Thanks to Surrealism, it seems that opportunity knocks a second time. (pp. 39-40)

It is noteworthy that virtually all of the theorists who have written about creativity, regardless of their theoretical orientation, compare creative activity to aspects of childhood. Beginning with Freud's (1908/1959) paper “Creative Writers and Daydreaming,” there is the claim that both the child at play and the creative writer have in common the desire to create

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a new reality or to alter the present one. Kleinians (Segal, 1991) propose that unconscious fantasy, related to the depressive position, motivates the creation of artworks in its attempt to restore and recreate the lost harmony of infancy. Winnicott (1971) writes of the potential space, discovered in childhood, as the location for future creative endeavors. Anton Ehrenzweig (1967), who combines psychoanalytic and Gestalt perspectives discusses the syncretistic vision of the young child that diminishes at a later age (8 years) yet is retained by artists. By syncretistic (a term introduced by Piaget), Ehrenzweig refers to undifferentiated perception in which an object is perceived in all of its forms. He claims that object identification, or thing perception, develops prior to form identification, or Gestalt, perception. An example distinguishing the two types of perception is illustrated in an anecdote conveyed to me by a colleague. He and his 5-year-old daughter were looking at a book on modern art together. He was puzzled by the titles of the works and their correspondence to the works themselves. His daughter, however, had no trouble making connections and at once explained them to her father. Ehrenzweig would say that the girl had grasped the hidden order of art, an ability lost to the father but retained by the artist.

Cognitive psychologists, like Howard Gardner (1982), also write of the golden age of creativity, which his research shows lasts only until age 8 years. It is no coincidence that the child's creative period is believed to come to an end at a time that coincides with the latency stage during which, on the one hand, libidinal yearnings are generally repressed and, on the other, the onset of abstract reasoning, for which attention to details and focus on external reality, becomes of paramount importance. Furthermore, it is generally believed that with maturation, the boundaries between primary and secondary process thinking become increasingly firm and less flexible (Noy, 1969). It is perhaps necessary to point out that when I speak of regression in adults, I do not imply that the adult literally regresses to a stage that is considered universally normal for a child. Clearly, a literal return to childhood is impossible. Ellen Handler Spitz (1985) correctly criticizes Winnicott's theory of the transitional object for its failure to explain the difference between children who cuddle their teddy bears and adults who create works of art. Adults who regress do not become children. Rather, they invoke earlier modes of functioning and experience that are similar to those that once prevailed. Or, as Sandler and Sandler (1994) write, there is a "release of something that persists but has been internally inhibited" (p. 431) that continues to exist underneath the superimposition of later

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modes of functioning. These early modes of functioning involve experiences dominated by primary process thinking, hallucinatory wish-fulfillment fantasy, raw, untamed instinct, fusion with the external world, and an absence of an observing ego (the capacity for self-reflection and distance from experience). Artists who regress in the service of the ego may exhibit any or all of the above modes of operation except for the final one. Whereas artists may lose themselves in the creative process, they are usually able to maintain their observing capacity and to distance themselves from an experience. Indeed, sometimes the artist operates exclusively from this distant mode. Author Yoram Kaniuk (personal communication, May 6, 1998), for instance,



describes how he sits at a café with a beautiful woman all the while contemplating how he will rush home to write about how he sat at the café with a beautiful woman. One must recall that the child's experience, in addition to representing heightened sensitivity to external stimuli, is also one that is colored by primal fears and anxieties frequently experienced in terms of life-or-death (e.g., separation). Hence, Breton's drowning metaphor. Marion Milner (1957), in her book *On Not Being Able to Paint*, describes the author's own experiences as a Sunday painter that result in her observations of conflicts aroused when uncovering inhibitions to produce free drawings. Her attempts at drawing require her to succumb to regression (i.e., accept emotional surrender and passivity), confront spiritual danger, and risk feelings of anxiety, terror, and rage. For instance, she recounts her attempt to free herself from the tyranny of outline as follows:

I noticed that the effort needed in order to see the edges of objects—stirred a dim fear, a fear of what might happen if one let go of one's mental hold on the outline which kept everything separate and in its place. (Milner, 1957, p. 16)

It is this tyranny that many artists experience as the temptation and fear in their work. And it is this tyranny that artists describe not in terms of childlike qualities but, rather, in terms of madness. The result of Milner's self-analysis through her art clearly supports Kris's claim that passive receptiveness, with all its attendant dangers, is a necessary precondition for the achievement of freedom of expression. The artist sustains the threat of loss of self, loss of reality, loss of control, and reactivation of trauma (Bush, 1969, p. [165](#)). One artist/patient who described the regression that takes place in her work, stated that “The loss of self can happen at any time during the process, no warning: Suddenly I'm There, no longer here—yet simultaneously here and there. During these times, as I'm coming out, I'm often trembling, blue with cold, sometimes my eyes are wet.”

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This artist's comments highlight the fact that, contrary to popular belief, regression in artists is not always experienced as voluntary or controlled. On the other hand, Arnulf Rainer, a contemporary Austrian artist, created a series of photographic self-portraits, titled “Face Farces,” in which he assumes a variety of grimaces at will. Rainer describes the process by which he arrives at his facial and bodily contortions:

To create certain facial tensions and physiognomical expressions a purely formalistic change of character, a mere desire to communicate and a straining of nerves is not sufficient; indeed, it is necessary to mobilize dormant and psychopathic reserves. It is the willingness to accept eccentric structures that give me the opportunity to change and intensify the expressions of both my face and my personality. I am not embarrassed to use psychotic talents to develop my artistic oeuvre. (Rainer, 1986, Preface)

Rainer is not the first artist who wished to appropriate insanity for creative purposes. In the 1920s, psychiatrist and art historian Hans Prinzhorn amassed a large collection of art made by psychiatric patients. Prinzhorn's collection had acknowledged influence on Surrealists, Dubuffet and his Art Brut, Abstract Expressionists, and artists like Alfred Kubin who is known for an oeuvre replete with elements of fantasy. Kubin wrote that he saw in Prinzhorn's collection the “miracles of the artistic spirit, dawning from the depths beyond all conceptual reflection” (Brand-Claussen, 1996, p. 15).



Despite many artists' purposeful adoption of insane mechanisms in their creative efforts as well as their expressed fears of going mad, most in fact do not. The question is why they do not, as their experience often consists in loss of boundaries and entry into frightening emotional terrain. Sandler and Sandler's (1994) distinction between regression that involves a loss of functional autonomy and regression that involves a loss of structural autonomy may be pertinent here. Whereas both types result in functional regression, the former takes place in artists who, through its duration, maintain structural intactness. The latter type, occurring in psychotics and organics, is much more dire because it results in the alteration of basic ego structures. Madness and creativity have been linked for centuries. Socrates and Aristotle held that poets were touched with madness. Artists themselves have contributed to this portrayal. Van Gogh, with his ear-cutting gesture, has long served as the archetypal mad artist. Lord Byron said of his fellow poets, "We of the craft are all crazy" (Redfield Jamison, 1993, p. 2). Despite these sweeping claims linking artists to madness, I wish to clarify that I am not stating that all artists are mad or even prone to madness.

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Rather, I am trying to highlight the ways in which many artists are able to get in touch with mad (i.e., primary process or childlike) aspects of their psyches and to use these aspects in a creative manner. Egon Schiele (see [Figure 1](#)) described this regression in the service of creation thus: "I want to tear into myself so that I may create again a new thing which I, in spite of myself, have perceived" (Knafo, 1993, p. 78).

I am aware that most of the artists I have referred to are primarily associated with the modern age. It is true that the artist's personality became important with the inception of modern art (Kuspit, 1998). Over the last century, the artist has been treated as exceptional and he or she has acquired a privileged position in society. In postmodern art, the line between art and life is often blurred. Thus, it may be argued that my assumptions concerning regression in art apply only to modern art. I do not deny that the *raison d'être* of many artists, like Rainer, is to purposely simulate regression or regressive states in their art, to blur boundaries between creativity and madness.

Although my case may appear stronger when referring to visual art in the modern and postmodern age, I believe it applies equally to other forms of art as well as to other eras. Furthermore, art that on the surface may appear impersonal and controlled is often the result of an anguished and regressive creative process. Nonvisual artists have long described the angst they experience in the creation of their works. English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, for instance, explained that his Dark Sonnets were written in blood. Therefore, although the proposition that artists come in contact with so-called mad parts of themselves in the process of creativity seems to belong to our modern and postmodern age, it is one that has found expression in the descriptions of numerous and varied artists' experiences for a very long time.

Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, a contemporary Israeli and French artist and psychoanalyst, in a personal communication (October 25, 1998), informed me that she chose the title *Autistworks* for a series of works "because this was my state in painting them. The autist in me" (see [Figure 2](#)). She claims to experience regression during creativity as "a kind of fragilization that happens, together with a loosening of the ties between the thoughts, a wild attention which is the opposite of concentration; and what is usually nonsignificant sounds or color get full of sense and things become full of some kind of life, and fragments of memories hang in the air, and then you

enter a zone without memories” (Lichtenberg-Ettinger, personal communication, October 25, 1998). Indeed, many of Lichtenberg-Ettinger's

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Figure 1. Nude Self-Portrait, Grimacing (1910) by Egon Schiele. Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna. Photo courtesy of Galerie St. Etienne, New York. Reprinted with permission.



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Figure 2. Autistwork n. 9 (1993-1994) by Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger. Copyright 1994 by Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger. Reprinted with permission of the artist.



works depict indistinct figures with blurred boundaries suggesting layers of thought, emotion, and memory (see [Figure 3](#)).

Lichtenberg-Ettinger's description of her creative process attests to a disinhibition that takes place at least during the inspirational phase of her work. For her, and many other artists, this disinhibition allows for low levels of arousal, defocused attention, and primary process thinking that is more associative and tolerant of a number of simultaneous representations. Past, present, and future merge and become undifferentiated. Self and

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Figure 3. Eurydice n. 9 (1996) by Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger. Copyright 1996 by Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger. Reprinted with permission of the artist.





other, as well as inner and outer reality, conflate. It is interesting that Kris's hypotheses regarding what takes place during the inspirational phase of creativity have been confirmed by neurophysiological research. Colin Martindale (1998; 1999) has conducted a number of studies comparing neurophysiological functioning in creative and noncreative people. He has found that creative individuals display lower levels of cortical arousal (creative activity requires defocused attention associated with low cortical activation), more right- than left-hemispheric activation (right-

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hemisphere activity is responsible for global, parallel, and holistic processes associated with primary process thinking), and lower levels of frontal lobe activation (low frontal lobe activity is related to less cognitive inhibition which allows for greater associative thinking) than noncreative individuals. These traits are exhibited by creative people specifically when engaging in creative activity.

An important question that arises concerns whether artists regress or simply retain the capacity for different modes of functioning. One could argue that it is problematic to

apply a term like regression, which clearly implies a norm from which the regression takes place, to artists, a group of people who, by definition, do not necessarily belong to that norm in the first place. Greenacre (1957/1971) is to be credited with pointing out artists' heightened bodily and sensory sensitivity from birth as well as the greater fluidity with which they pass through libidinal stages. She refers to artists' "predisposition to an empathy of wider range and deeper vibration" (Greenacre, 1957/1971, p. 485) than that of ordinary people. Furthermore, because graphic artists clearly possess refined visual processing, it should not be surprising that their access to such stimuli is well developed. Whether this should be called regression is doubtful. Certain people habitually think in visual terms and their access to such stimuli is therefore not a result of regression but, rather, a manifestation of their characteristic style of functioning.

On the other hand, it is clear, from my experience with artists, that regression does constitute an integral part of their work and experience. Therefore, even if their starting point appears less restrained than that of nonartists, there still exists regression from that point. Such regression is regularly expressed in the artist's description of the creative process, or at least one part of it, in terms of feeling driven or out of control; of boundaries between the artist and the outside world becoming blurred; and more. Author Amos Oz, for example, judiciously describes the regressive experiences he had during the writing of his novel *The Same Sea*:

This is a book that I despaired over more than anything else I've ever written. And it also frightened me while I was writing it. I had the feeling that I was getting all fouled up.... I had the feeling that maybe it wouldn't end well. Not in terms of how the book would be received. But in terms of its implications for my identity. Sometimes I was afraid that something happened to me. Something in my mind went awry. Something wrong. Sometimes when I did other things, like shaving or standing in line at the bank ... the characters of the book would flow in and out of me ... as if it wasn't me writing them, but them writing me. And I was beset by the fear that I was losing my own identity. Maybe I was going insane. Wondering if there was any way back from this washing away of

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the borders between me and not me. I had the feeling that I was in the middle of the sea, that I might not be able to reach the coast, to get back to myself. That I would never again set my feet down on terra firma. ("Mysticism Within," 1998, p. 16)

I believe that there is nothing wrong in assuming that there exists a difference between pathological and healthy, or adaptive, regression, similar to Kohut's (1971; 1977) distinction between pathological and healthy narcissism. Moving backward need not imply any more negative connotation attached to it than moving forward. If the move backward can open doors, why should it be viewed in pejorative terms? Yes, it is risky; but new and original ideas are not born without risk. Salvador Dali (1964) once wrote, "The only difference between a madman and myself is that I am not mad!" (p. 21). On the face of it, this statement sounds overly simplistic and even silly. Nevertheless, it is a very profound statement which perhaps best illustrates Kris's distinction between the psychotic and nonpsychotic artist. The fact that Dali referred to this statement as his first motto and the theme of his life is revealing, for it indicates that his was a lifelong struggle to enter the depths of his madness, use these mad elements in his art and, most of all, not to be overtaken by them.

The bottom line remains, Is the artist or the artistic product overwhelmed or destroyed by the regression that takes place? Is it controlled and adaptive regression? And can the artist shut it off when necessary to attend to other reality demands? Author David Grossman (1998) has described living in two worlds: the world of his writing, in which boundaries are blurred and experiences are regressive and emotionally overwhelming, and the world of everyday life, in which he attends to his family and daily chores.

### **An Object Relations Viewpoint**

What is it that allows an artist not only to risk regression, but also to return from it? The answer to this question is where much of the controversy lies surrounding the concept of regression in the service of the ego. Ego psychologists, as well as their opponents, have long claimed that only someone with a strong ego can regress in its service (Bellak, 1954/1973; Noy, 1969; Schafer, 1958). However, this view fails to explain why a considerable number of artists live nonfunctional lives, a fact that can be indicative of a weak ego and poor reality ties. Clearly, postulating a strong (or a weak) ego does not account for the uneven development in ego

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functions witnessed in many creative individuals. A theory like Winnicott's (1971), on the other hand, claims that a good-enough mother allows for the internalization of benign introjects which in turn fosters the capacity to tolerate ambiguity and accept paradox. This approach also fails to explain why numerous artists experience early parental losses or poor, neglectful, and even abusive parenting (Pollock, 1975). In fact, many artists are consciously aware of their attempts to use their art in order to repair defective early upbringing.

This leads to a question that may elucidate the problem at hand: Does art possess therapeutic powers? Some believe that art merely repeats and cannot repair while others, myself included, believe that art is potentially therapeutic. I therefore do not see the necessity to postulate that artists' strong egos or healthy early object relations hold the key to creative regression. On the contrary, I believe that artists use their art as a means of strengthening their egos, building their self-esteem, or both. Many artists whom I have interviewed over the years have stated, in one manner or another, that had they had a happy childhood, adequate parenting, or high self-esteem, they would not have had to choose the tortuous path of creativity.

In this connection, I recently gave a lecture to a group of art therapists who brought up an interesting point. They regularly encounter regression in patients who are not artists and who are not particularly talented in the arts. They described to me the difficulties they face in fostering therapeutic regression in persons who lack the ability to take pleasure in the creative process or its final product. This matter confirmed my hunch that part of what allows artists to regress is the confidence they have in their abilities or, to quote George Klein (1976), a pleasure of effectance, a joy in the sense of competence. John Gedo (1996) has also applied Klein's notion of effectance to creative individuals and believes that the competence produced by creativity serves to heighten the artist's self-esteem. One artist described the agony and ecstasy of her creativity thus: "Yesterday I read a version of a chapter I wrote last year, and I just sat and wept. Why? Because it was so good—and I had created so many universes, so many alternate realities, that it was torture to pick one to stand for all of them."

When Kris wrote of the artist's regression, he referred to a one-person, intrapsychic act. In recent years, psychoanalysis has moved from a one-person to a two-person

psychology. I would like to propose that a similar transition take place with regard to the relationship between the artist and the creative product. For Balint (1968), therapeutic regression

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occurs within a dyadic relationship. He conceived of regression as benign and beneficial to the therapy on condition that the analyst provide an accepting environment in which the patient can feel safe to regress. Loe-wald also recognized the analyst's role in validating the patient's regressive experience so that the patient is not left alone with it. Blum (1994) too noted that therapeutic regression is dependent upon and influenced by the object relationship with the analyst both inside and outside the transference.

In a similar vein, I am suggesting that artists' regression is enabled by the relationship to their craft. The structure of art, like the analytic setting, establishes preordained limits within which artists must work (Knafo, 1993). It functions as a holding, containing, and validating environment, allowing artists' psychic organization to fluctuate with relative safety. And just as analysts may intervene with an interpretation to regressive patients to prevent their becoming overwhelmed by regressive forces, so too artists can move from what Kris called inspiration (regression) to elaboration (editing, criticism) to attain a higher level of organization and meaning.

When assessing analyzability, one tries to ascertain whether a person can risk the transference of an analysis, the pull toward regressive modes of experience, including the possible experience of loss of self. Despite all that has been written on the subject of analyzability, many analysts acknowledge how difficult it is to predict ahead of time who can and who cannot experience and rise from such regression. Some patients appear intact and classically analyzable at the onset of treatment, "only to show massive preoedipal regression and ego decompensation or a 'functional breakdown' at some point during the treatment or at the threat of termination and final separation" (Blum, 1994, p. 71). Freud (1913/1958) himself recognized this uncertainty and therefore recommended a trial period of treatment. Unfortunately, with all our knowledge and assessment tools, we often cannot know until we try. Donald Kaplan (personal communication, February 2, 1990) once suggested that what makes people analyzable is not diagnosis but, rather, their ability to form a relationship.

I am convinced that such is the case with the artist. There is an important difference, however, for artists require the ability to have a relationship with their craft. Some artists possess relatively weak egos and poor ties to reality, yet their relationship to their work is strong and it is this relationship that sustains them and allows them to regress in its service. In fact, many artists live for years with no close relationship in the outside world and no external validation for what they do (e.g., Emily

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Dickinson). In spite of this situation, they continue to create and their drive is not weakened. I believe this is because the work of art embodies containing (Bion) and self-object properties (Kohut) and functions in mirroring or idealizing capacities. Kris's concept of regression in the service of the ego is therefore exactly what it says: The regression feeds the ego, not just the art product.



I am not the first to recognize the transferred object relationships artists have with their art (Greenacre, 1957/1971; Jacobson, 1964; Weissman, 1971). Jacobson (1964) compared artists' hypercathexis of their created product with the child's exclusive oral investment in his or her single primary love object. Weissman (1971) too perceived the created object as “derivative of the early infantile analge [sic] of object relationships” (p. 401). Adrian Stokes, himself a painter and writer about art, has said, “The work of art is esteemed for its otherness, as a self-sufficient object, no less than an ego-figure” (Fuller, 1980, p. 116).

I agree with these views yet wish to take them a step further. I believe that the work of art not only functions as a type of object relationship but also provides a site for transformation and change. Indeed, creative activity produces a locale wherein the artist seeks objects and reenacts reunion with them (Ana Mendieta's work is an excellent example of this.). It is true that some artists' relationship to their work has the quality of compulsive repetition and therefore does not allow for development beyond an unsatisfactory early relationship. Artists like Arshille Gorky or Mark Rothko, great artists in their own right, were nonetheless psychically stuck and, as a result, their art reflects an almost addictive use of repetitive patterns. In Gorky's case, there are endless variations on a theme based on a photograph of his mother (whom he lost in childhood) and him as a boy. In Rothko's oeuvre, infinite reproductions exist of two or three stacked colored rectangles (Fuller interestingly claims that Rothko's work serves as an excellent example of the absent mother.) The fact that both artists eventually committed suicide may be related to their inability to use their art to fully express an otherwise inarticulate relationship as well as transform it. I am therefore suggesting that many artists reunite and identify with their original objects in the creative process, thereby embodying maternal generativity (Knafo, 1996). Artworks are, at the same time, like babies that result from this symbolic reunion (McDougall, 1980; Segal, 1991). Through their work, artists give life to objects of their own. Byron (1812-1818/1886), in his poem “Childe Harold's Pilgrimage,” describes this relationship between the artist and his creation:

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'T is to create, and in creating live  
A being more intense, that we endow  
With form our fancy, gaining as we give  
The life we image, even as I do now.  
What am I? Nothing; but not so art thou,  
Soul of my thought! with whom I traverse earth,  
Invisible but gazing, as I glow  
Mixed with thy spirit, blending with thy birth,  
And feeling still with thee in my crush'd feelings' dearth, (p. 115)

### **Regression in the Viewer**

I would like to add a few words about the audience's reaction to works of art as involving regressive processes analogous to those experienced by the artist. Cezanne described the aesthetic response as follows:  
[A painting is] an abyss in which the eye is lost. All these tones circulate in the blood. One is revived, born into the real world, one finds oneself, one becomes the painting. To love a painting, one must first have drunk deeply of it in long draughts. Lose consciousness. Descend with the painter into the dim tangled roots of things, and rise again from them in colors, be steeped in the light of them. (Milner, 1957, p. 25)

Cezanne's oral imagery of intoxication, as well as his description of the viewer's eschewing of ego boundaries and one's hold on the self, recall the drink from a mother's breast, the pull for symbiosis. It is particularly striking that Cezanne does not leave his viewer in this state of regression, blissful as it may be. He thus describes how the viewer, after he or she has drunk, must rise again.

Cezanne's description intimates the reasons why many find the aesthetic experience threatening as well as enlightening and enjoyable. One aspect of the aesthetic response involves the artwork's ability to require its audience to confront the potential for regression. At the same time, it is reassuring because, although the artist often represents fragmentation, he or she is usually not fragmented by it. Artistic content provides a channel for discharge and artistic form binds the anxiety which arises from such discharge.

Some modern art, and much postmodern art, is experienced as much more disturbing than the description given by Cezanne (although it must be remembered that Cezanne's work caused quite a stir when it first appeared in France). I believe the major reason for such strong reactions is related to the fact that much of this art draws the viewer to identify with artists who present themselves in a regressive state. In addition, many

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postmodern artists manipulate the audience and abuse their trust. Viewers are attacked, exposed to things they would rather not see, and forced to take part in an experience not of their choosing. Finally, the setting, or boundaries, between art and life is often broken down (e.g., literal frames have disappeared in much contemporary art and the viewer often becomes part of the artwork itself) leaving the spectator without the feeling of safety derived from the knowledge that his or her reaction belongs to an illusory realm. Audiences often recoil from or avoid art which requires such risks in response to it. They feel that the regression demanded of them is not compensated for by the aesthetic pleasure offered by the work of art.

It is this point that Kleinians, such as Segal, Fuller, and Rickman, have elaborated well in their writings on the aesthetic response. Segal (1991), for instance, claims that the viewer identifies with the artist's creative process, a process which involves the balancing of destructive and reparative forces. If one is unable to tolerate one's own aggression, then he or she will encounter difficulty with art products that contain such affects and acts. Peter Fuller (1980), in his book *Art and Psychoanalysis*, devotes a chapter to the aesthetic response to *Venus de Milo* as a recreation, in fantasy, of the damaged image of the mother. Because the viewer observes a statue that has sustained damage and fragmentation, he or she is invited and compelled to complete (i.e., repair) it internally. It is this admission of original destruction *à la* Klein that has the potential to enhance the aesthetic experience. Whereas we tend to think of destructiveness in art as exemplified in Cubist, abstract, or sensationalist postmodern art, Rickman (1940) has emphasized the aesthetic delight experienced by many who view mutilated Greek and Roman statues. For Rickman, "the whole psychic mechanism of frustration, retaliation, compensation, guilt, and anxiety for restitution ... becomes operative and creative in art" (Fuller, 1980, p. 127).

Thus, regressive forces in the viewer function in two ways. They have the potential to arouse fear and anxiety because of the aggressive and destructive forces they unleash and because of the loss of boundaries they represent. They can also be reassuring and developmentally constructive because they invite us to achieve, at least in fantasy, the

experience of feelings and situations otherwise rarely had in adulthood. It is this balance between destructive and constructive, and between fusion and separation, that exists in every work of art and that creates its own unique aesthetic response. Just as the analyst is called upon to regress temporarily along with his or her patients (Blum, 1994; Loewald, 1981), so too the art

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audience is invited to participate in regressive processes parallel to those the artist experienced during creation as well as the regression depicted in the artwork itself. These regressive forces ultimately belong to a dynamic two-way relationship between artist and viewer. Those who allow themselves to regress as part of their aesthetic response to artworks become not only art observers but also cocreators. To summarize, I have endeavored to depathologize the concept of regression and to separate the capacity to regress in the service of the ego from the precondition that one initially possess a strong ego. I have brought Kris's concept of regression in the service of the ego up to date by expanding the terminology beyond that of libidinal energy cathexes and ego psychology. I have also tried to illustrate its relevance when viewed through the lens of developmental theory, neurophysiology, and object relations. The creative process, as well as the aesthetic response, involves a willingness to engage in regressive operations. Regressive forces exist in creativity, and these forces allow artists to frequent levels of consciousness not usually accessible to most adults. Whereas these processes resemble childlike states or characteristics generally associated with madness, they are under the artist's control in the sense that he or she has the capacity to make the transition from these states to others requiring observation, discipline, and criticism. Creative regression is facilitated by the artistic setting and relationship to one's craft, just as therapeutic regression is facilitated by the analytic frame and transference relationship. The artist's relationship to his or her art is a type of object relationship, imbued with reality and fantasy, comparable to that between patient and analyst. In its self-object capacity, the work of art validates the artist's sense of effectiveness. It also has the potential to repair defective early object relations and to strengthen one's ego and self-esteem. According to this view, it does not matter whether artists had good or bad mothers, or mothers who were present or absent. The domain of art allows for playful engagement with one's mother of the past, one's fantasy mother, as well as the newly created mother, the transformational object of art. Regression is therefore integral to both creative activity and personal growth.

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