

# ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

**Presentation Review by Christopher Brown**

**Civilization and the Discontented:  
A Presentation by Christopher Bollas**

**Community West videoconference recorded on August 8<sup>th</sup> 2020**

**ISSN: 2044-7221**

**Date of Publication: 16 March 2021**

**Citation:** Brown, C. (2021) Presentation Review: Civilization and the Discontented by Christopher Bollas. *ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine* 12 (1).

Available at: DOI 10.25602/GOLD.atol.v12i1.1500



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License

<http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

A message from Los Angeles – the city of angels. Angels visit humans at times of crucial intervention and this YouTube presentation by the psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas certainly had an impact on my understanding of our current situation of potential collapse in the time of neoliberalism, climate change and the virus Covid-19. He may be familiar to art therapists through his book 'The shadow of the object: Psychoanalysis of the unthought known' (1987), which explores some of the non-verbal aspects of human experience through an object relations lens.

What I didn't know about was his historical involvement in social justice in the U.S. This was conveyed through the introduction by John Grienerberger of Community West and informs the depth of his political thinking. Bollas weaves these strands – psychoanalytic, social and political – into a tapestry that illustrates his psychological understanding of the destructive aspects of the crises facing our species. He highlights psychotic processes that threaten to dismantle the structures of group conscience necessary to contain sociopathic behaviour and which could lead to the collapse of civilisation. In a spellbinding talk, he offers a vision of such breadth and insight into our current situation it left me feeling in awe.

This feeling reminded me of his 'aesthetic moment', which 'constitutes a deep rapport between subject and object, it provides the person with a generative illusion of fitting with an object' (Bollas, 1987 p 32). It also links to Bion's theories of maternal containment and the process of thinking, concepts central to Bollas's understanding of the human condition.

He examines mental processes in the large group we term a nation. His focus is the US in 2020, where the transmission of false news (a social virus) and the biological phenomenon of the virus, created a perfect storm. "Covid, presidential madness, police killings, mass unemployment and civil unrest merged into one malignant condensation to produce an unthinkable mental reality". He presents a developmental model of individual psychology where "love and law, empathy, the ethical sense and otherness are crucial to our becoming civilised beings". He then contrasts this with psychotic thinking processes, which although part of a spectrum of normal life, may become dominant in extreme ideologies. He contrasts ethical mental structures leading to a conscientious self with psychotic mechanisms leading to malignant states of mind and associated loss of "the

capacity to perceive reality, to form sound judgements, to filtrate strong feeling and be socially adaptive”.

Trump’s degradation of what is real, where conspiracy theories “displace the genuine complexities of modern life” lead to those narrowly organised and coherent hallucinations we call delusions and allow the individual a sense of control. Bollas sees such pathological group thinking as an understandable psychotic, social process – one that we need to understand in order to change people’s way of thinking. He mourns the loss of any structure in government that is able to process social distress. He goes on to give examples of positive models of action where outside social pressure is brought to bear on seemingly intractable historical situations such as apartheid in South Africa and the conflict in Northern Ireland. Such models depend on the concept of triangulation – “when two opposing forces are locked in battle the process of a third can create another thinking space”. As we know from Freud, Bion and others, the third space is also a developmental position that allows increased perception of reality. But when we disconnect from disturbing mental contents this capacity is diminished. “In the larger group it is easy to become sociopathic when the demands on our empathy can feel impossible”.

Bollas’s argument leads inexorably to how we can make large group democracy functional. He highlights the transition in America from conscientious founding fathers to sociopathic leaders who deny responsibility to the large group for their actions. “Serial lying that prevents a population from perceiving reality is a mental health issue”. He advocates public discussion to engage with the psychopathologies of the large group, using people skilled in group relations, to “free the group to come to more considered and sane solutions”.

Ninety years have passed since Freud’s ‘Civilisation and its Discontents’ was published, upon which Bollas’s title puns, and in which Freud envisions psychoanalysis helping neurotic distress arising from the interplay between instinctual life and the demands of civilisation. What Bollas is saying is that civilisation is suffering mental health issues that threaten its collapse into a more primitive state of being. He brings his understanding of mental processes to bear upon this malaise in the hope that it will help us avoid collapse into cynicism, apathy or despair and encourage us to talk to others whose views may differ from our own and in this process start to heal what is tearing us apart.

Christopher Bollas's presentation of his paper can be found here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7eBWG\\_DgRAo&pp=QAA=](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7eBWG_DgRAo&pp=QAA=)

'Civilization and the Discontented' appears in 'Psychoanalysis and Covidian Life: Common Distress, Individual Experience' Edited by Howard B. Levine and Ana Staal, published by Phoenix Publishing House.

### **About the Author**

Chris Brown is an experienced art therapist, educator and supervisor. He currently works in private practice and freelance to organisations.