

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Book Review by Tessa Dalley

**Reflections on the Aesthetic Experience: Psychoanalysis and
the Uncanny
Gregorio Kohon**

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Psychoanalysis, London) 2016
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Gregorio Kohon is a Training Analyst of the British Psychoanalytic Society. He has published numerous psychoanalytic writings as well as four books of poetry in Spanish and his novel 'Red Parrot, Wooden Leg' was finalist for the Fernanda Lara Prize, Planeta, Barcelona. His next book, 'Truco Gallo', is a collection of short stories (also in Spanish, co-authored with Mario Flecha and Viqui Rosenberg).

Gregorio Kohon's latest publication, 'Reflections on the Aesthetic Experience: Psychoanalysis and the Uncanny', explores and reflects upon psychoanalytic understandings of estrangement, the Freudian notions of the Uncanny and Nachtraglichkeit, and how these are evoked in works of literature and art. Taking the works of Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, Louise Borgeois, Juan Munoz, Anish Kapoor, Richard Serra, Edward Much, Kurt Schwitters and others, Kohon provides close insights and comparisons into these works. The book also includes a chapter on the Warsaw Ghetto Monument and the counter-monument aesthetic movement in post war Germany. Kohon

explores how some works of art and literature represent something that otherwise eludes representation and how psychoanalysis and the aesthetic share the task of making a representation of the unrepresentable.

Using many of these ideas, Gregorio Kohon presented the Madeleine Davis Lecture (2107), an annual lecture for the Squiggle Foundation, with the title 'The Aesthetics and the psychoanalytic frame – The work of Eduardo Chillida'. Aspects of the relationship between aesthetics and psychoanalytic thought were explored focusing on Chillida's inspirational and monumental work. Much of what Kohon was putting forward has links and overlaps with ideas developed by Winnicott, which were of particular interest to art therapists. For example, Kohon compares notions of the 'frame', something being contained within certain boundaries and the 'setting' where something is positioned by describing how Chillida 'combined sculptural forms and environmental spaces to produce extraordinary urban landscapes.' The artist thought of his sculptures as a 'rebellion against gravity', where there is a dialectic between empty and full space, between 'movement and static tensions'. In this way the work itself creates the space, the surrounding landscape becoming part of the sculpture. Winnicott's ideas held both the setting and the frame in mind for the development of understanding of the early experiences of the infant and the relationship with his carer. The frame allows a dynamic process to evolve within, like the mother holding her infant. Without the mother, if she has been fully present, the frame becomes the infant's own representation onto which he can project and hold his mother in mind.

The concept of the Uncanny, something that ought to remain hidden or secret but has come to light, creates a feeling of anxiety that something is pending and about to be revealed. Kohon suggests that this dual concept of the simultaneously familiar and disquietingly unfamiliar may describe fundamental aspects of the aesthetic experience. The in-between space, the Uncanny, also resonates with the transitional space between mother and infant. Something is created in-between which forms the potential of a relationship. When considering the work of Anish Kapoor, Kohon writes 'Together artist and spectator create this transitional space. Winnicott has shown that the

creation of a transitional space is not a conscious effort – it just happens. It arises from a certain need in the child who is then able to feel that he is not at the mercy of his projections nor at the mercy of his objects. The infant can play, laugh, tease, share jokes, be naughty or nasty and above all participate in a commonly shared space before he feels and experiences himself as a completely separate being' (p73)

Throughout the book Kohon draws together other threads and themes reminiscent of Winnicott's work such as references of presence and absence, of materiality and spirituality, the existence of an intermediate area of experience in human beings – a virtual yet very real place created by the mutual contribution of inner reality and external life. 'For Winnicott this is an essential part of being and of living.' The book makes compelling reading for psychoanalysts, psychotherapists, art therapists, literary and art critics, academics, students and all those interested in the matter of the aesthetic. Psychoanalysis and art are considered in their own terms, allowing a new understanding of the aesthetic to emerge.

Tessa Dalley is Discussant and Chair of Squiggle Foundation.