How does the Mind Enter the World?

Aron Demetz´s Creative Process from the Perspective of Analytical Psychology

Konstantin Rösler

A not-unjustified criticism of a depth-psychological view of art is that it
equates the artist with the work, thereby focusing on the personality of the artist and losing sight of the work’s artistic message.

 Neither of these shall form the basis for the following considerations. Rather, the focus of a depth-psychological interest in Aron Demetz’s creative
process is the question of how it takes place and what is expressed in it. How does he access the idea? What happens within the artist on the way from the idea to the work? On which roots does Demetz draw, and which collective
themes find their individual expression through him? What are the connections
between the artist’s creative process and the processes of becoming aware
of previously unconscious parts, which play such a key role in the depth-psychological process?

The Creative Process

In the beginning is the word. Demetz begins with writing. But these are not abstract texts. It is rather a word or a sentence in which the idea begins to take shape. He seems to be searching within himself for the concept that will first reveal itself in the form of language. The various idioms in which he is at home serve this purpose, whether in Italian, German, or Ladin – for example, in the term ‘*Heimat*’, which exists only in German, while ‘*patria*’ has a different emphasis in Italian, meaning ‘fatherland’, not a sense of home. These terms do not come out of nowhere, as from a tabula rasa, but build on what has already been. He is not an artist who follows an idea from nowhere. At the beginning of a new work, there is obviously an interweaving of the path his work has taken so far and what is now emerging. It is a process characterised both by the continuity of the process of development, but also by the moment of the newly emerging, a search for the further path on the edge of consciousness, for where it might now lead. A path emerges along the words, condensing what is in the process of emerging. The language of words seems to serve less as an abstraction or reflection of the content, and more as an initial exploration. Such an approach to language is much closer to poetry than to reflection. The content is condensed in the word and thus becomes the nucleus of a crystallisation that is the first recognisable manifestation of what is only just germinating. The mind begins to take shape on its way into the world.

 When Demetz says of himself that he is not an artist who creates out of nothing, but rather works in the continuation of a development; and that what emerges does not grow without a cause, but is based on something, this does not mean that this determines his new work, as reflected in the materials he uses, especially the wood he often favours, which has its origin in something living. Although it is subject to many different influences as it grows, it nevertheless strives for a form that is its own, a form towards which it evolves. In this case, too, the creative process seems to be determined by something indeterminable that takes shape. The final form of the sculpture
is the result of a continuity in relation to what has already become, like a process determined by the possible goal that gives the idea the right shape. The searching movement of the creative process in Demetz’s work seems to move along this intersection between causal and final influences. This results in a rhythm between long phases of engagement, letting things happen and receiving, which gradually changes into a creative, active process with increasing concreteness, dealing with how the idea can be transformed into material through sometimes meticulous activity. Such an interplay of a beginning at the edge of consciousness, connecting with parts that are not yet conscious and transforming them into concreteness, has parallels with work with unconscious content, as used in depth-psychologically orientated developmental processes at the level of therapeutic or individuation processes. Dreams and imaginations are used here as expressions of content that is not yet conscious but is relevant to development, as work with the formations of the unconscious. At the end of the twentieth century, the prevailing view was that dreams were nothing more than lightning storms from the brain stem, random electrical discharges from the reptilian brain, from which the parts of the cortex associated with consciousness compose a plausible dream story while waking. Today, in contrast, academic research is based on the waking-dream continuity hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, states of consciousness in dreams and waking life represent a spectrum of continuity to which different functions are assigned without the need for the concept of the unconscious. Even if these cannot yet be differentiated in detail, they seem to be important for maintaining our psychophysical equilibrium. In creative processes, such as the one used by Demetz, similar exchange and resonance phenomena appear to play a central role in establishing the link between the waking consciousness and the new, but at the same time one meaningfully connected to the individual.

 Emerging creativity research in the neurosciences has found similar indications about what goes on in creative processes. A good balance between different neural systems seems to be important in the search for creative solutions. There needs to be a balance between a resting network, which we enter when daydreaming or forming self-generating thoughts, and a control network, which is linked to the goal-directed processes of waking consciousness.

 According to Carl Gustav Jung, imagination and creative activity as a ‘primordial phenomenon’ of the psyche are ‘the only immediate reality’ in which we can experience being.1 The creative process is therefore ‘the clearest expression of the specific activity of the psyche’ and ‘the mother of all possibilities’, in which the psychological opposites of ‘the inner and outer worlds are joined together in living union’.2

 This parallel between the creative and the therapeutic process is in no way intended to place the activity of artistic creation in the context of the treatment of psychological suffering. Rather, it shows that the therapy of psychological conflicts requires similar processes in the confrontation of conscious
and unconscious parts, as in artistic work. It also shows the diverse healing potential inherent in the creative approach. According to Jung’s analytical psychology, therapeutic processes are not primarily about setting goals, but about developing the ‘creative possibilities latent in the patient himself’3 and accessing a state of ‘fluidity, change, and growth’4 that makes an autonomous life in accordance with one’s own self possible in the first place.

The Transformation of the Figure

Looking at Aron Demetz’s oeuvre as a whole, with its focus on the human fig-ure, a common thread seems to emerge that can be seen in different phases. The early works are still close to a representation of external reality. However, the viewer already encounters the inward-looking gaze that reappears in later sculptures in the lifelike figures of mostly young people. This introverted attitude opens up an early perspective on the dimension of what lies behind and hidden within. But the focus is still on the question of our nature.

 In later figures, such as those that comprise the multi-part work *Advanced Minorities*, the interior seems to emerge and become more visible. Areas of milling appear as possible injuries, as traces of time, interrupting the flawlessness of the bodies. The idea came from nature, an important source of inspiration for the artist: the windward and leeward sides of trees have been incorporated into the design of the figures. The resulting distortions on otherwise ideal body surfaces open up the contrasting tension between perfection and imperfection, giving the figures their own unique vitality. It is as if they show the wounds that life has inflicted on them, bearing them with stoic acceptance as an expression of their inevitability and belonging to their own form. They can thus appear as a visualisation of psychological processes of development in which mental changes, but also wounds, are irreversible, and the question arises as to whether and how they can ever be integrated in order to allow life to continue. Another variation, which explores this process even more intensively and emphasises the destructive element much more strongly, can be found in the burnt sculptures of the *Burning* series, in which no undamaged surfaces are visible. Here too, however, it is not primarily a destructive principle that seems to be at work, but rather a transformative character in the encounter with fire. In spite of the extensive damage, the original form remains recognisable, and in some places mushrooms grow which metabolise the apparently lifeless figure into another, new form of life. The destructive element appears here in a value-free context, not as a will to destroy, but as an expression of transformation – just as every creative process is always accompanied by a destructive aspect in which the old is overwritten or other possibilities are simply dropped. The carving of a wooden figure also contains such a destructive element, as the new form emerges from the trunk exposed to the tool. The analogy to psychotherapeutic processes is obvious when the development of a narrative, a vivid new approach to one’s own history and becoming, allows old inhibiting self-beliefs to be abandoned.

 This process is even more evident in the *Intervallo* (Interval) series. Hidden bodies emerge from the old shell under crumbling crusts that seem to burst open like a snake shedding its skin to reveal the new. This phase ultimately leads to the *Autark* (Self-Sufficient) series, with its expressive bronze figures emerging from the previous ones like a metamorphosis. In their independence and presence, they express not only the self-sufficiency that gives them their name. The process of their creation is also based on this principle, in that the design is partly left to the casting process itself and the surface, which is partly fused with the fireclay, is not polished. Only the remaining stumps of the casting channels have been polished. This allows a view of the interior while emphasising the processual nature of their creation.

 They emerge from the previous series, which was concerned with wounds and transformation through destruction, as self-sufficient and self-con-
tained forms in the sense of autarchy. This whole phase seems to be about how vulnerable, how ephemeral, how changeable we are.

 More recent works have been created with sequoia wood. The nature of the giant redwood makes it possible to formulate the motif of temporality in a particular way. Through sandblasting, the different resistance offered by the soft summer rings versus the hard winter rings creates deep furrows along the natural structures, giving the works a special character. This creates fragmentations and perforations in the busts, which are hollowed out on the inside, echoing the motif of wounding in earlier works. They refer to the fragility of life, as if the flow of time, the flow of unconscious images, has been stopped for a moment and become visible, otherwise hidden or lost in the constant movement of changing images. It is a moment of becoming aware of some-thing that has been fermenting and maturing in the unconscious, as in certain moments of therapeutic work or in processes of individuation – a new insight, an old trauma that can come to light in such moments. It appears as a visible manifestation of the insight, in which time is briefly stopped and what was previously present only as an inkling becomes recognisable. The latent form is linked to conscious perception and becomes capable of consciousness. At the same time, however, a series of abstract works were created during this phase, perhaps as transitional works, which, detached from the human form, now deal with temporality all the more intensively by concentrating the gaze entirely on the sequence of annual rings. Abstract and natural forms merge into one another, pointing to the peculiarities of the regularity, the formative, the arrhythmic in the rhythm of time, as in a small untitled work in which two worked out annual rings overhang the contour and abandon regularity. The works in this series thus seem to pose the question: What remains?

 The last piece to emerge from this phase was a remarkable work, described merely as a draft, entitled *Vestire il tempo* (Wearing Time), but was also known as *Erschaffung Adams* (Creation of Adam). It deals with the relationship between man and machine. The question of what remains of man is raised to a collective level. The central promise of the digital revolution is, among other things, that of solving the world’s problems on a digital level. It culminates in the transhumanist movement, described by the American polit-ical scientist Francis Fukuyama as the ‘most dangerous idea in the world’, the idea that we will one day be able to transfer the human mind to a hard drive and thus free ourselves from our mortal physicality.5 Regardless of whether and when such ideas can become reality, they point from a depth-psychological perspective to an unconscious collective identification with a creator god in which humanity takes its destiny into its own hands. *Vestire il tempo* takes up the relationship between man and machine, between the creator and the created, with reference to the more active human figure and the more passive robotic one. Calling it a draft opens up the possibility of future developments and raises the question of what happens when the created being develops a life of its own. This does not seem to express a fundamental hostility to technology, which would be alien to Demetz anyway. After all, he uses a wide range of apparatus-based and computer-controlled techniques in his works. What emerges is rather a neutral view of the future, borne by a certain curiosity but without judgement. The transfer of the theme to the sequoia wood and its reference to temporality, which is important to the artist, also alien-ates the technical aspect and places this contemporary relationship between man and machine in the context of a natural process of development. Here, too, the work appears as an individual expression of one of the central collective themes of our time. The question of how the mind enters the world is being answered in this way in parts of society today, with machines and, in their most recent manifestation, AI programs taking over important functions. Consciously and sometimes unconsciously, a state is being sought that will eliminate death as the greatest flaw in human existence. It is as if man, having tasted the Tree of Knowledge and been expelled from Paradise, now wants to taste the Tree of Life. But the price of immortality seems to be the surrender of one’s own humanity. The Genesis account of creation could perhaps be read today as a warning that it is not possible to have it both ways. This latest strand of Demetz’s work thus focuses on the question: What will be?

The Archetypal Dimension

The creative process, which can be understood as an oscillation and a living connection between the conscious and unconscious levels, transcends the individual and has access to collective and archetypal dimensions of the unconscious. Fundamental human themes are thus expressed in a variety of ways across cultures and time.

 This was particularly evident in the juxtaposition of Demetz’s work with ancient sculptures in an exhibition at the National Archaeological Museum of Naples (MANN). In the context of Greek and Roman statues, the works from the *Advanced Minorities*, *Burning*, *Intervallo* and *Autark* series create a sharp contrast, while at the same time recognisably joining this tradition from across the ages. The modern manifestation of the archetypal theme of ‘man in his form’ proves to be different from antiquity and an expression of our zeitgeist, especially in its wounds that deviate from idealisation. At the same time, however, Demetz’s works, in their contrast, raise the question of what connects the different forms and artists of such different eras, what spirit they express. The result is a dialogue between the sculptures that draws the viewer into a discussion and communication about the fundamental questions
that run through Demetz’s entire oeuvre: how we are, how transient, what remains and what becomes.

 The exhibition itself becomes a resonance space that connects the viewer to his or her own roots in an archetypal dimension, addressing not only the personal layers of the unconscious, but also the underlying collective ones. Whether or not one wishes to subscribe to a theoretical construct such as the concept of archetypes, the idea of the exhibition allows one to immerse oneself in an experiential space in which a connection with the forms of other times and cultures becomes possible and questions about the similarities, accentuations and differences arise in a mysterious and ultimately unanswer-able way. Establishing contact with such a dimension of experience may be a characteristic and fundamental feature of artistic creation, but it has been realised here in a particularly impressive way.

 The artist’s statement that he does not create out of nothing is extend-
ed here into a spatial tradition that reaches back into the past via traces of his homeland’s woodcarving art and the sculptural art of the Middle Ages and antiquity, pointing to the future with its theme of temporality and the development of man and machine.

Concluding Remarks

When Aron Demetz deals with the aforementioned questions of human existence, transience, permanence and the future, an approach to an answer seems to resonate subliminally in his works. It may lie in the dialectic of heal-ing and wounding that runs through his work, which ultimately dissolves as a synthesis in the transformative process of a healing that leaves its visible traces. Healing, then, does not mean the restoration of a previous state of perfection, but rather the integration of the wound into being, an attitude that also forms the basis of many therapeutic processes. This is based on the understanding that completeness is more than perfection because it contains the perfectly healed and the flawed in one. It is said of the early Chinese vase painters that they could paint perfect patterns onto porcelain, but that they always deliberately allowed a small flaw to flow into the perfection, out of respect for the living.