



## The Practice of Art, Surrealism and the Unconscious

“To resolve the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality into an absolute reality,  
a super reality.” —Andre Breton

**T**he term “surrealism” is said to have been coined as early as 1917 by Guillaume Apollinaire, the famous art writer and poet. However, it did not really come into usage until Andre Breton wrote The Surrealist Manifesto in 1924. Breton claimed that surrealism was primarily a revolutionary movement and politically was associated with communism and anarchism. However, the politics doesn’t interest me as much as some of the underlying ideas of the movement which dovetailed nicely with other developments of the era, such as Freud’s popularizing of the “subconscious/unconscious” mind; the idea that our conscious thoughts and feelings are a small part of oneself.

C.G. Jung took this idea much farther and said that the unconscious or subconscious mind was connected to the “collective unconscious,” which was capable of producing images charged with meaning, not just for the individual but for an entire ethnic or social group. And most important of all, the “collective unconscious” produced our ‘image’ and experience of God, a supreme being (or highest value—whatever that may be).

As I have said in my broadsheet, “The Value of Art,” I believe that art’s true value is for the artist who undertakes the quest of making her highest value into

something that can be perceived by herself and others. So, when I discovered Jung, I discovered a supporter of my own beliefs. But as a practitioner of Mindfulness (in the Buddhist sense—self observation) it was my own experiences with art that convinced me of the validity of Jung’s ideas (and many other thinkers as well). Based on my own experience, I believe our conscious mind is not only a small part of us but that it is also very badly trained and utilized by most people.

Anyone who has ever attempted to meditate knows that the mind jumps around like a “drunken monkey” and usually has great difficulty remaining focused on one thing. Instead of calling it “mind”, though, let’s call it attention. YOU are where your attention is. In the Hindu tradition art and meditation are overtly linked. Many images are created solely for the purpose of focusing the mind or attention.

So, in my thinking, the mind is like a spotlight that can be pointed in different directions and at different intensities, and when it is, we see different things. But, I am most curious and interested in what remains in darkness. What lies outside my range of my normal conscious attention and does it function similarly or differently than the little me, I usually experience as myself?

For me, after many years, art has provided the answer to what lies in the darkness. And along the way, darkness can engender fear and anxiety. In his autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflection*, Jung talks

at length about the fears and dangers he experienced in a process he called 'individuation' and which for me is art. Meeting and greeting your demons is definitely on the agenda for anyone who seriously wants to be most fully herself—as an artist or anything else.

What I have learned from art about my SELF, the one who keeps to the shadows, is this: there is an intelligence which resides within me that is far more capable than my poor, slow stupid conscious mind. This other SELF that keeps to the dark can create, synthesize ideas and create visual structures with lightning speed and accuracy. The catch is that me, the little slow stupid self I am aware of most of the time, cannot order or command my super SELF to work to achieve what I would like. It has to be coaxed, talked into running into the phone booth to put on its super suit.

So, as an artist, the question for me or you is, how does one do that?

One way to begin, which was pioneered by Betty Edwards, was to learn to how to see without thinking about what you are seeing. She called that "Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain," and her premise was that the right side of the brain could do some of the 'super' things I wanted. She is right. It works. I know that from experience. But that is drawing, a very defined specific activity that one sets about consciously to do. What about the process of being creative: of making something that never existed before out of what is already in front of you.

That is the real magic! That's what I want. This is what I have learned:

First, one needs a medium of expression, the organ that you will use to express your creativity. This means you need to choose something and learn it until you can literally 'do it in your sleep'. Music requires practicing scales for hours each day, drawing requires many hours of 'seeing' what is actually in front of you. But even after you've acquired lots of skill, how do you make something with it that's never existed before? From what I've seen, it is often the most skilled who become stuck in technical perfection and lose touch with what is in their own darkness, something truly new and unique. How do we avoid that trap? How do we make something new, something that is really unique to us?

My answer is that we must first put aside any form of impatience. We must be totally focused on seeing what is in the dark. If you already consciously know about it, you can't do something really new, you can't create something that's never existed before. Which means you have to trust yourself, your own darkness—even without knowing what is there. You must trust that it will give you the answers you need and want. This is difficult. Each person has to find that self-trust and honesty and sincerity in herself. So once you are technically skilled, patient and sincere you invite your other self to act by working at it each day. By being methodical.

One of the greatest musicians of the 20th century once told me, "An artist is just like a construction

workman. He goes to work every day. Carefully does what he or she is supposed to do. Eats her lunch and when the five o'clock whistle blows, she goes home. This is the process of creation for the artist."

You also have to be very alert, very sensitive very aware of all the cross currents in your thoughts, feelings and sensations.

Finally, you have to persist. And this means that you are not asking your SELF that is largely unconscious for a specific result delivered in a specific way on a specific timetable. The Other you will only work WITH you, not FOR you.

If you do all these things, you will experience great joy that is independent of anyone else. You will be able to feel it whenever you want. You will be an artist.