

JOSEPHINE REGAN

Art, Occupation and Play

“When I live, I am not truly alive.
But when I act, I feel I exist.” (Antonin Artaud¹)

In this essay I explore notions of ‘art’ and ‘play’ as overlapping concepts, and examine these concepts as human activities. I suggest that creative activity or creative occupation is an innate need for human homeostasis and self-actualisation. Initially I present my own art practice as an occupational process, and follow this with a description of elements which define art and play, as well as some possible motivating factors and likely benefits to be gained from engaging in activities of this type. I draw attention to several theories relevant to this occupational approach, including Freud’s “Pleasure Principle”, Maslow’s “Theory of Needs”, and Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of “Flow”. Finally, I present the work of artist Agnes Martin as an example of homeostatic and self-actualising needs being met through art as play and occupation.

There was a time when my studio work was predominantly concerned with the transformation of affect into visible form and the emotional investment of self in the created object. My work was informed by the writings of child psychologist DW Winnicott and his descriptions of the early developmental stages of self-consciousness. I applied his concepts of “transitional objects” and “potential space”, creating ambiguous forms with affective intent through immersive process.² The pressures of external employment intervened, however, eventually making this degree of focused attention impossible and obliging me to examine my practice in alternative ways.



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My studio activity became merely one of many necessary daily tasks slotted in amongst others and restricted by available time; but also a pleasurable repetitive routine with opportunity for endless small variations and open-ended exploration of form. My earlier objects representing imagined affective states were replaced by a representation of conscious temporality, occupation and play. As the importance of making and exhibiting increased, the work's meaning seemed to move from an internal position of content to an external one of process. I shall briefly describe my occupational process below.

For my small drawings (as included in this essay) I use a wide range of luxurious drawing materials, plus some odd items, including pieces of coal, a dried-up biro refill and wire soldering. When I have time, I sit down with a stack of plain white cards and draw, one card after the other, searching for lines, colours and forms that are pleasurable to make and see. The aesthetic experience includes the sensation of forms as described through movement of the hand; the sensation of focused attention and expectation; and the visual appreciation of marks. Initially the drawing is merely an activity with no affective engagement, but as the work progresses, the forms become more interesting and I endeavour to expand on this with each subsequent card. If my interest in them does not increase, I will try something new; but if the direction is inspiring, I develop the series in that mode until my ideas are exhausted. I keep drawing until I run out of time, in which case the series is unfinished and I will continue later. If the forms lead nowhere, the series is quite short; but if the forms are engaging, I become increasingly immersed in the process until I reach a point of satisfaction and can improve the cards no further. At that point I finish and do something else. It interests me that I stop at the point where I might produce multiple successes if I were to continue. This must be because the activity is about open-ended experimentation and play, and to reach a satisfactory conclusion ends the pleasure; there is then no purpose and no stimulation in further continuing that series.

The way in which these works are exhibited is also important. I have shown them in a card-file box where one must flick through each card in turn. I have digitally projected images onto a screen at four-second intervals, introducing the elements of light and automatic progression. I have also wall-mounted them as blocks of cards, their sequential numbers pencilled onto the wall to reinforce their serial nature and to avoid transformation into a single 'art object'.

This experimentation with exhibiting modes is not only a representation of temporality; it also extends the game in my real-time temporality, as

the drawing experience transforms through photography, computer manipulation, exhibiting modes and locations, and finally through the reactions of others. I am not only attempting to represent the temporal process of occupation through the work's visual nature, I am also performing the temporality of occupation. The work not only represents occupation and play in its mode of making and exhibiting; I am also occupied and playing.

Consideration of my changed process has led me to investigate art as open-ended playful process, as well as to enquire into the motivations and pleasures gained from these activities.

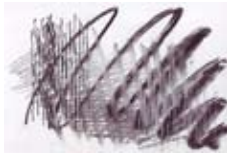
The term 'art' has a spectrum of meanings and attracts numerous theories concerning content, form, objects, institutions, and much else; but my interest here is limited to art as a process and the value of art's process to the practitioner. On the topic of creative activity, Theresa Schmid writes in *Promoting Health Through Creativity* that our innate capacity for creativity and our innate need to express put creativity into the category of "normal everyday tasks", of which all human beings are capable, although some people make more effective use of their creativity than others. Art, then, arises out of an innate capacity for, and need to express, creativity.³

However, although creativity may be innate, art is a cultural activity and is not part of the 'everyday'. We choose to do art for cultural reasons, and are influenced by what art stands for in our society and by our socially-constructed values and psychology. Despite the fact that many art-type activities are performed as part of the everyday, these are not considered to be 'art', but are called such things as 'cake decorating' or 'playing with the children'. Cultural activities are structured through context, rules and expectations, and as a cultural activity the art process requires the intention to create 'art'.

While there may not be an 'innate need' for art itself, art is a cultural expression of our innate need for creative activity, through which we achieve social approval as well as satisfaction of the creative impulse. Creativity is also an important element of play. The term 'play', however, is used for a wide range of activities including strongly goal-oriented games such as competitive sport or gambling, which are not necessarily creative or 'playful'. Most theoretical literature on play is found in child development psychology, but some of these concepts are also relevant to adult creative occupations including art, which I will address below.

Creativity is said to be facilitated by playful activity, and may be understood as a 'playful attitude'. Play in this sense can be defined as "an intrinsically motivated and self-directed activity that is





experienced as pleasurable”⁴, and words such as ‘spontaneous’, ‘fun’ and ‘enthusiasm’ describe what it feels like to play. It is relatively free from externally-imposed rules or constraints, and occurs within its own limits of time and place, being separate from everyday reality with internal rules and loose links between means and ends. Play occurs only in an environment of familiarity and safety, with an absence of fear or anxiety, and is exploratory only in this limited sense.⁵

Play can potentially be part of any occupation since a ‘playful attitude’ may be “enfolded into work”⁶, but creative activity for adults has a tendency to become productive in the sense of having economic or social value and eliciting social approval, which appears to contradict the non-goal oriented, or ‘autotelic’ (end-in-itself) nature of play. However, creative ideas and solutions in adult occupations often arise when not being directly addressed, by allowing a ‘free play’ of ideas rather than forcing a solution through focused, goal-directed behaviour. Activities may include ‘playing around’ with ideas or materials, which introduces a subliminal element to the process, creating new links between concepts through the relaxed spontaneity of play. Adult play, however, is more usually described as ‘leisure’, although leisure does not necessarily require a playful attitude. Play for adults is generally considered to be of little importance or even unacceptable,⁷ and Freud certainly felt that adults do not play at all. The creative arts are often considered a legitimate form of adult play, which merely allows art to be viewed as a superfluous leisure activity in opposition to vital ‘productive’ work.

At a superficial level, therefore, the terms ‘art’ and ‘play’ appear to be independent concepts with various common elements, but the discussion above reveals both art and play to be motivated by our innate need for creative occupation. However, if creativity is to be considered a need, the satisfaction of it must bestow some benefit or fulfil some purpose; and one must then ask what need is satisfied by creative occupations, and what motivates humans to pursue them?

Theories of motivation are generally grounded in the discourse of evolution and a biological understanding of humanity. This is no doubt responsible for the current widespread belief that all human behaviour relates to survival needs. Play, for example, is considered to be a necessary part of child development, of the child’s physical and cognitive growth and social adaptation.⁸ There is minimal play literature relating to adult play because adults do not fit into this developmental model; but also because of what Brian Sutton-

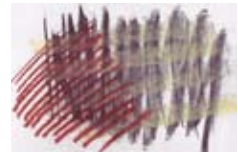
Smith calls a puritanical denigration of play in intellectual terms.⁹ The evolutionary understanding of humanity conversely extends to culture, where ‘occupation’ – with its connotations of paid employment – is commonly understood in survival terms, with the assumption that we work to satisfy our physiological needs of food and shelter rather than for any intrinsic occupational value, and that other life activities merely support this work for survival.¹⁰

Yet, we do many things that appear superfluous to survival, with many people engaging in activities that put their survival at serious risk, such as climbing Mount Everest or traversing the Antarctic. This does not, however, mean a denial of the relationship between these occupations and survival. Instead, those behaviours that appear superfluous, trivial, or even dangerous could be considered survival behaviour of a different type.

In her book *Promoting Health through Creativity*, Schmid cites numerous authors involved in anthropological research who believe that human behaviour shifted during Upper Palaeolithic times (40 to 50,000 years ago), with creativity becoming an increasingly important element of daily life and survival and of significant benefit to the human species. These behavioural changes are said to be the cause of neurological “permanent pathways” in the brain for the expression of creativity.¹¹ Therefore, rather than being a superfluous extra, creative activity became a vital element of the biological human being. The sense in which creativity is vital seems to operate on an extended scale, from basic defensive activities, through homeostasis and maintenance of the human organism, to personal growth and self-actualisation.

In terms of regulatory or homeostatic needs, it can be seen that all living things need to be active in some sense as a continuous defence against entropy, and organisms must continuously repair and build themselves to maintain a static position of health. Humans have additionally developed a niche as adaptive and creative opportunists, from which evolved our human consciousness of self with its need for actualisation. A lack of motivation or self-actualisation needs in an individual is often associated with ill-health.¹² Conversely, research has shown that highly creative individuals are also highly motivated, playful, curious, persistent and committed, as well as psychologically healthy, independent, productive and happy.¹³

The subject of happiness is an important one when considering motivation. In the early 1900s Freud developed his “Pleasure Principle” from the observation that what people desire most in life is to make themselves happy.¹⁴ His observations of what people





actually do in life led him to develop the complementary “Reality Principle” which explains our pragmatic ability to persevere with unfulfilling tasks for the sake of future happiness, so preventing our lives from disintegrating into the chaos that would result from widespread instant gratification.

These theories of Freud accord with the concept of ‘regulatory motivators’ which conceive of the human body as self-regulating, with internal systems that maintain optimum conditions permitting it to thrive.¹⁵ The body responds to influences from both inside and out, and makes changes to maintain stability. Regulatory motivators similarly maintain our psychological selves, and this is where Freud’s theories of art as a neurotic defence or sublimation meet homeostasis and the normality of the pleasure principle; psychological homeostasis is to be found where occupation meets physiology. Art and creative activities are often perceived as psychologically therapeutic, but in reality all intrinsically motivated activities can promote homeostasis and self-actualisation.

An informative theory on this topic is Abraham Maslow’s “Theory of Needs”, developed in the 1960s. Maslow’s needs hierarchy accounts for the varied and changeable motivation of human beings, both between different people, and in one person at different times. He described two types of needs: “deficiency” and “being” needs. The “deficiency” needs include basic requirements such as food and shelter, safety and social acceptance; and he positioned these at the bottom of the hierarchy. He placed the “being” needs of aesthetics, cognition and self-actualisation at the top. Maslow postulated that our motivation rises through this hierarchy as each need is met in turn, from the bottom up. In other words, we are only motivated to seek the “being” needs once our physiological “deficiency” needs have been met. Thus he accounts for our constantly changing individual levels of motivation for various activities, as well as for all human motivation from the most basic physiological to the most cultural. However, there is a difference in how our “being” and “deficiency” needs are met. Satisfaction of “deficiency” needs leads to physical homeostasis and a progression of motivation up the hierarchy. “Being” needs become their own reward, however, and are repeated more often once they are successfully achieved.¹⁶

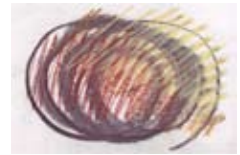
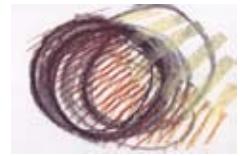
The concept of activities becoming their own reward has also been thoroughly examined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who developed the concept of “Flow” during the 1970s, when it appeared to him that theories of motivation based on models of deficit failed to account for the fact that humans relinquish basic needs when engaged in absorbing activities. “Flow” may be defined briefly as

an optimal experience during intrinsically motivated activities in which the person becomes fully immersed, and which is associated with high levels of motivation and feelings of great freedom, enjoyment, fulfilment and skill.¹⁷ From his research, Csikszentmihalyi concluded that our most enjoyable experiences involve the process of discovery and novelty, and that these experiences stimulate the pleasure centres of the brain.¹⁸ He designated nine factors as important elements of flow, which can be summarised as: feelings of certainty and confidence in what one is doing; concentration on the present moment of an activity with loss of awareness of passing time, external concerns and self-consciousness; the experience of “discovery and challenge” as stimulating but without anxiety or fear, and the activity as “autotelic”.¹⁹ Any activity has the potential to become autotelic, since flow is an attitude rather than an activity. Flow is not the equivalent of happiness – which is superfluous during the flow experience – although flow activities do contribute to overall life happiness and a stronger self-concept. Flow does share many features with play, however, but with the important addition of adult goal-directed behaviour.

From the foregoing discussion, creative occupation could be described as a need of human consciousness for the purposes of homeostasis and growth. These words seem small and insignificant for the inspirational and vital concepts which they represent. Thus, I will attempt to capture a little of their import through the work of artist Agnes Martin, who not only produced a consistent body of work over many years, but whose occupations of art and life seemed finally indistinguishable. The particular way in which she worked seems to illustrate a balance between the cultural seriousness of art and the playful attitude of creativity, for the achievement of homeostasis and self-actualisation in her personal life.

Agnes Martin (1912–2004) was born in rural Canada, but lived and worked for most of her life in the United States, including a period in New York. She finally retreated in 1967 to the New Mexico desert, living in relative isolation, and producing for the remainder of her life the work for which she is best known.

This work consists of drawings and paintings of straight lines on a plain ground, often as grids rather like graph paper, or horizontal lines. Many of her works have two parallel sets of lines, one set shadow-like beneath the coloured wash, the second set drawn over it. These freehand grids and lines are often placed on a ground in such a way that a plain border contains them, which at times is quite wide. Sometimes the lines are confined within a shape, such as an oval or a triangle, but occasionally the pattern bleeds to the edge





of the work, as though limitless. Her work has often been described as 'minimalist' due to its spare and geometric appearance, but Agnes Martin has described herself as an abstract expressionist because she intended her work to cause an affective response in the viewer.²⁰



In addition to her visual art, Agnes Martin produced written work which attempted to explain her intentions, methods and philosophy. In her piece *The Untroubled Mind*, the poetic writing defines an ideal creative attitude of detachment and openness. She wrote: "Not thinking, planning, scheming is a discipline. Not caring or striving is a discipline..." and "If you live by inspiration then you do what comes to you." She also wrote of "a retired ego", the avoidance of "hunger" and a mind that was emptied. Agnes Martin did not believe that an artist can influence the way in which a viewer will interpret a work, only that viewers will find what they need. She also wrote of joy, happiness, the sublime and consolation; and that "the responses of happiness and joy are our first concern."²¹



Examining her work from the viewpoint of occupation, one can observe the laborious, careful and time-consuming nature of her drawing process; the element of repetition in the accurately spaced lines of each work, as well as in the multiple works produced over many years. Looking at her process as play, one could address her insistence on the importance of happiness and inspiration, and the avoidance of goal-oriented activity expressed as detachment, openness and the retired ego. From the viewpoint of art, however, a paradoxical compromise can be observed, where the culturally-defined intention of creating art has led to a serious, disciplined, goal-directed determination to perfect an attitude of happiness, inspiration and play. Perhaps from the combination of Agnes Martin's visual and written work I could formulate the useful definition that "art as occupation" is a culturally-defined, socially-sanctioned, goal-oriented form of intrinsically-motivated, self-actualising, creative, adult play.



- 1 Antonin Artaud in Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 173.
- 2 Donald Woods Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1971).
- 3 Theresa Schmid (ed.), *Promoting Health Through Creativity: for Professionals in Health, Arts and Education* (London and Philadelphia: Whurr Publishers, 2005), 5.
- 4 L Diane Parham, "Perspectives on Play", in Ruth Zemke and Florence Clark (eds), *Occupational Science: The Evolving Discipline* (Philadelphia: FA Davis, 1996), 71.

- 5 MA Runco and SR Pritzker, (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Creativity. Vol. 2.* (California & London: Academic Press, 1999), 393-399.
- 6 Parham, 79.
- 7 For example, Jennifer Creek in Schmid, 82.
- 8 For example, Jeffrey L Dansky, "Play", in MA Runco and SR Pritzker, (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Creativity. Vol. 2.* (California & London: Academic Press, 1999) summarises modern play research.
- 9 Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 18 and 201. Sutton-Smith comments that "the denigration of play in intellectual terms is shown by the absence of the key term play from the index of almost every book about the behaviour of human beings."
- 10 HJ Polatajko, "The Study of Occupation", in Charles H Christiansen and Elizabeth A Townsend (eds), *Introduction to Occupation: The Art and Science of Living* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2004), 43.
- 11 Theresa Schmid, 33.
- 12 For instance see Ulrika Bejerholm and Mona Eklund, "Time use and occupational performance among persons with schizophrenia", *Occupational Therapy in Mental Health*, 20 (1), 27-47. Also Nicky Hayes, *Foundations of Psychology: An Introductory Text* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1998), 193 on depression and apathy. These both deal with the lack of volition associated with mental illness. For the converse situation of occupational disruption or deprivation as a detriment to health, see Janice Miller Polger and Jennifer E Landrey, "Occupations As a Means for Individual and Group Participation in Life", in Charles H Christiansen and Elizabeth A Townsend (eds), 201-206.
- 13 Regina Conti and Teresa Amabile, "Motivation and Drive", in MA Runco and SR Pritzker (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Creativity. Vol. 2* (California & London: Academic Press, 1999), 254-256 .
- 14 Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and Its Discontents*. (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 16. (Freud also posited two ways in which we seek happiness – the positive, where we seek pleasure directly, and the negative, where we avoid painful or unpleasant stimuli.)
- 15 Charles Christiansen, "Occupation and Identity: Becoming Who We Are Through What We Do", in Charles H Christiansen and Elizabeth A Townsend (eds), *Introduction to Occupation: The Art and Science of Living* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2004), 123.
- 16 Charles Christiansen, "Occupation and Identity: Becoming Who We Are", in Charles H Christiansen and Elizabeth A Townsend (eds), 126, provides a brief overview. Alternatively, AH Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).
- 17 See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Csikszentmihalyi> for approximation of this definition, last visited on 22 October 2006.
- 18 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity, Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 108.
- 19 Csikszentmihalyi, 111-113.





- 20 Work by Agnes Martin can be found on the internet – do a search on Google for 'Agnes Martin painting', or go to www.artnet.com. or to www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/martin_agnes.html last visited on 22 October 2006. Alternatively there are numerous illustrations in M Catherine de Zegher and Hendel Teicher (eds), *3 x Abstraction: New Methods of Drawing, Hilma Af Klint, Emma Kunz, Agnes Martin* (New York: Yale University Press & The Drawing Centre: Edward Hallam Tuck Publication Programme, 2005). Many of Agnes Martin's writings are to be found in Barbara Haskell, Anna Chave, and Rosalind Krauss, *Agnes Martin* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992).
- 21 Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (eds), *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings* (London: University of California Press, 1996), 128.

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* All drawings: Josephine Regan, 2006, *Drawing Series 2* (set: 77), mixed drawing media on card, each 15 x 10 cm.