

**ON CREATIVITY:  
COMPARING THE ARTIST'S EXPERIENCE WITH  
CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH**

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## Abstract

My purpose in this paper is to stage a dialogue with creativity researchers about their work—and mine. My interest is practical: I focus on ideas about how creativity works rather than why and I limit my attention to research that is corroborated by my own creative experience.

I found that early researchers developed serviceable but general models of creativity by characterizing creative people. While I could identify with their profiles of creators, their results seemed generalized to accommodate as many creative practices as possible. I found that when researchers began to characterize creative processes rather than creative people, their results matched my own experiences more identifiably. Furthermore, researchers who pursued methods for *facilitating* the creative process arrived at results that compare closely to my own techniques for creative production.

I conclude by surveying some current areas of creativity research which promise more complex, individualized models in the future. I demonstrate the merit of Gruber's evolving systems approach by illustrating—with examples from my own recent practice—how the development of one creative product may be inextricably tied to an entire body of work.

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## Table of Contents

Permission To Use .....	i
Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	iv
1. Introduction.....	1
1.1 On Creativity.....	1
1.2 Creativity: Person, Product, Process, Situation.....	3
2. The Creative Person And Product .....	5
3. Models of the Creative Process .....	9
3.1 Right & Left Brain Cognition .....	9
3.2 Wallas: Four Stages of Creative Process.....	10
3.3 Other Paradigms of the Creative Process.....	12
4. Creative Situation: Facilitating Creative Process .....	20
4.1 Creative Release and Freedom To Fail .....	20
4.2 Creativity For Everyone .....	23
4.3 Zen.....	26
4.4 The Creative Situation: Conclusion .....	28
5. Asking Creators about Creativity .....	29
5.1 A Body of Work: My Own Experience .....	33
5.2 Toward More Complex Models .....	36
6. Conclusion .....	37
References .....	40
Appendix A .....	43
Appendix B .....	45
Appendix C .....	52

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### *1.1 On Creativity*

My mother wouldn't give me colouring books when I was a child. She believes they stifle creativity. My only memories of colouring, that supposedly ubiquitous childhood activity, are from school, about grade two. I used to invent rules to make colouring more interesting. I remember one style that specified a firm outline of each shape, and a lightly-applied uniform interior. In another style I scribbled loosely in the large shapes so that I could go back and fill in all the gaps with a crazy-quilt of other colours. Psychologist Paul Torrance, a pioneer of creativity research, measures divergent thinking by challenging subjects to list the most possible uses for an ordinary object, such as a brick (Davis 258). In my elementary school years, those stiff thickly-outlined drawings of sailboats and fairy tale characters provoked *me* to think divergently. Unable to understand how colouring could be an interesting or fun activity, I invented new rules—not just one set, but a whole series of alternatives to colouring—which you could call "the most uses of crayons and a colouring book."

Before I began my graduate course of studies, my paradigm for my creative practice was science-like. I would first look for an art problem to solve, usually how to illustrate a worthy subject. Then I would work out how to solve the problem. I might do research on possible symbolic content to enrich the imagery. Then I would execute the work.<sup>1</sup> I came to graduate school to find something more in my art practice, without any idea what I was looking for. I have spent two years exploring how I generate, select and respond to

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<sup>1</sup> I was not unaware of this paradigm. I even found it amusing to frame assignments (in studio courses) as such problems: How can I make something that *looks like* an analytical cubist painting? Superimpose multiple views of the subject. Fracture the image. Treat the surface as a series of overlapping, usually triangular facets. Use a subdued, monochromatic palette. Create a shallow pictorial space. Incorporate a small amount of painted or actual text. Major areas of visual activity should be central; the edges are unsatisfactorily resolved.

ideas. Over the course of that exploration, my creative paradigm has changed. Today, my practice seems more open-ended and less rational. My work focuses on investigating my pre-existing preoccupations rather than superimposing those obsessions onto carefully-selected themes. I am still looking for problems but I am increasingly likely to pursue those problems for which I do *not* see immediate or closed solutions.

Does my recent change in approach make me more creative, or just differently creative? What creative thinking tools do I and other creators use? This paper attempts to describe how artistic creativity feels according to psychologists, artists, and me.

The main body of this paper explores psychological models of creativity. The researchers cited are psychologists, or social scientists whose work in creativity deals primarily with psychology. I do not care to prove or exemplify whatever theory of creativity may be True. I want to identify that theory—or theories—which matches my experience of creativity in some useful way. To that end, I limit my scope to that research which can be corroborated by my own practice. I offer specific illustrations from my own experience wherever it is practical and informative to do so. The second, simultaneous body of text (in boxed insets like the one to the right) juxtaposes other artists' first-hand accounts of their own creative experiences. Artists speaking in their own words about their own experience of creativity are authoritative; however subjective, revisionist or mutually contradictory they may be, these models of creativity *work* for some practising artists. I have, metaphorically, asked the artists' advice and I respect their opinions. By physically interrupting the theoretical text with experiential accounts, I hope to include creators more fully in the discussion of artistic creativity.

<p>An Art can only be learned in the workshop of those who are winning their bread by it. Samuel Butler (Cohen and Cohen 87)</p>
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### 1.2 Creativity: Person, Product, Process, Situation

The fundamental problem of creativity research is, simply put, that you have to define creativity before you can go looking for it. Because researchers differ in their underlying definitions of creativity, one of the foundations of the field is the distinction between the creative person, the creative product, the creative process, and sometimes the creative situation. I will introduce these distinctions briefly here to establish the framework for subsequent chapters.

I've always worked against myself because I have to be the friend and the strongest enemy. I'm the one who knows how to do it and I have to get on the one who doesn't know how to do it.

Robert Rauschenberg  
(Rose 100)

Some researchers seek to characterize the *creative person*, often in the hopes of being able to predict which people (especially children) will turn out to be creative. However, there is a widespread reluctance in psychology to accept the idea of innate, unexpressed creativity. The definition or measure of creativity has become whether it results in a *creative product*. I cannot just *be* creative. I must actually produce something. The product can, in its turn, be evaluated for its creativity

Sometimes I feel awful after I paint. Do you know why? Because I go back to an untenanted house. I go back to a place where there isn't anything. I leave myself and go out to that person and when I come back there's a desert.

Alice Neel  
(Nemser 132)

Today, many researchers have put aside the creative person and product in favour of studying the *creative process*. Is it the same for all creators? For all projects or disciplines? Can it be improved, interfered with, or taught? Finally, some researchers are investigating the idea of a *creative situation*, the sorts of settings and interactions conducive to creative behaviour. Psychology has often neglected this notion, under the misapprehension that situation has no effect on

Working directly on stone, I got very excited about it on the basis of some accidents that occurred... I'm against turning in a sketch or a study and letting the shop handle it. If I don't get involved there's nothing in it for me.

Lee Krasner  
(Nemser 105)

creative production. On the other hand, popular publications and educational research put a greater emphasis on the creative situation since their objective is generally to teach or facilitate creativity.

In the following chapters I will discuss these areas of research separately and in more detail. I will begin with a discussion of the research into the creative person and product (Chapter 2), which forms both an historical basis for the field of creativity research and our intuitive understanding of what creativity is. I will continue with the presentation of several pertinent results in the investigation of the creative process (Chapter 3). I will compare the techniques suggested for building a creative situation with my own repertoire of creativity skills (Chapter 4). Finally, I will discuss some challenging ongoing research which attempts to encompass and interrelate the several facets of creativity to build more complex, individualized models (Chapter 5). I will use examples from my own recent practice to illustrate the need for such models of creativity, models that can accommodate the life changes of the artist and the development of entire bodies of work.

## 2. THE CREATIVE PERSON AND PRODUCT

Most of the initial research in creativity explored the nature of the creative person.

Psychologists set out to characterize creators and develop tests or predictors for

creativity. But how were they to judge the effectiveness of their work? They would have to compare their tentative test results to some reliable metric. Consequently, most psychologists are reluctant to accept the idea of innate, unexpressed creativity. Instead, a creative person is usually

defined as one who generates some creative product. That *product* can be evaluated for its creativity. Conventional criteria include novelty, appropriateness, transformation of constraints and richness of meaning (Glover, Ronning and Reynolds 11-12).

Certain concepts seem to *choose* to come into existence. For example, in 1962 I saw clearly, walked around in my mind and decided not to make, a 6'X6'X6' black sculpture... A few years later, I read that Tony Smith had made exactly this sculpture... On the evidence, I can only assume that we caught the same concept.  
Anne Truitt (96)

This basic connection between the creative person and the creative product has some interesting consequences in the context of a creative practice. First, the simple notion that the only tangible evidence of creativity is the work produced reminds me of the oldest advice on writing I ever received: the way to become a writer is to write.<sup>2</sup> However, some of the usual criteria for evaluating the creativity of a product are more complex than they might initially appear. Measuring a product's *appropriateness*

I work steadily for eight hours a day, because I don't believe that the artist has to wait until the muses come. I believe that the muses live within you and all you have to do is paint.

Rufino Tamayo  
(Gruen 110)

suggests that there is a "correct" answer waiting to be discovered and experimentally confirmed. That suggestion is better suited to scientific discovery and mechanical invention than to artistic practice. I would choose to interpret appropriateness (of a

<sup>2</sup> This advice, repeated to me by Jim Gardner, is too widespread to credit to any one source.

creative product in an artistic practice) as some measure of internal consistency or satisfaction. For example, in *The Dinner Party*, Judy Chicago and her collective responded to the under-representation of women in the historical and cultural record. Its content is represented not just in the place settings but in the selection of the "guests" and in the use of hospitality as an underlying theme. I find the piece a rich, satisfying experience that functions on many internally-consistent levels, but I would not use appropriateness *in the sense of singularity* to measure the success of *The Dinner Party*; it is certainly not the only creative response possible (or accomplished) on its theme. I have some of the same difficulties with the suggested criterion of *novelty*. Novelty is closely related to "originality," a notoriously difficult concept in art and one that has come under fire in post-modern discussions of artmaking. While the notion of novelty traditionally has been quite prevalent in Western discussions of art, we seldom consider how evaluating "originality" depends upon the knowledge (or ignorance) of precedents and how culture-bound the primacy we give to the idea of novelty may be.<sup>3</sup> Most of the creativity research to which I refer in this paper uses the concept of novelty as a criterion of the creative product unquestioningly. One of the widest gulfs between psychological creativity research and current art discourse is this failure to consider the culturally-specific role of "originality" as a measure of creativity. I cannot bridge this gap in a paper of this scope and focus but I will annotate those references that illustrate how intrinsic the notion of novelty is to psychological research in creativity.

Having established the connection between the creative person and the creative product, we can take a closer look at the results of research into the creative person. One of the most empirical approaches to creativity research is *trait analysis*. How can we

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<sup>3</sup> It is not hard to imagine or believe that in some cultures an artist's ability to conform to visual traditions is equally as important as the quality of ideas expressed or their novelty.

characterize the creative person? Test him or her and identify a profile: a list of typical traits. The obvious danger, of course, is that creativity may eventually be defined as "that which is tested by creativity tests." Some researchers argue against the trait analysis approach (Gruber 5-6) or find its applications flawed. It is clear from reading in psychology, though, that many of the basic findings of trait analysis are intuitively sound and implicitly underlie most researchers' expectations of the creative person.

No art was ever less spontaneous than mine. What I do is the result of reflection and study; of inspiration, spontaneity, temperament, I know nothing.

Edgar Degas  
(Peter 31)

Creativity tests fall into two main categories. The *divergent thinking tests* look for evidence of creative thinking skills (Davis 258). Divergent thinking is the ability to come up with a wide range of ideas or associations. The other category of test is the *personality or biographical inventory*. The inventory of information (about attitudes, interests and other personal qualities) is compared to the traits of creative people. What traits typify creative people? Davis summarizes: "confidence, independence, high energy, adventurousness, risk-taking, curiosity, wide interests, humor and playfulness, artistic interests, attraction to complexity and novelty... Two virtually flawless biographical predictors of adult creativity are having had an imaginary playmate as a child and involvement in theatre, for example, in high school (258)."<sup>4</sup>

I have to dedicate myself. Do you understand? I don't feel conflict in myself because if I do, my work doesn't go well. If there's a conflict I have to sit down or go to sleep to solve it.

Barbara Hepworth  
(Nemser 15)

Divergent thinking skills are certainly vital to my own creative identity, and have been since childhood. As youngsters (about ages ten or eleven), my sister and I often played a game of our own devising, although I am sure it was not unique to us. One of us

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4 Yes, I was involved in high school theatre. No, I don't remember having an imaginary playmate.

would propose to the other a pair of seemingly unrelated words. The other would begin at once to construct a chain of word-association pairs leading from one word to the other. For example, I might challenge her to connect "chair" and "asparagus." Her successful response might be: chair-table, table-dining, dining-food, food-asparagus. The game was not competitive. I seem to remember equal enjoyment in posing unlikely pairs and in connecting them. Nor did we have rules of play. Instead, we shared an *intrinsic* understanding of what constituted a legal word-association. We also strove for an implicit standard of excellence in our responses. A short chain was usually better than a long one. Unexpected connections were better than predictable ones. (My chair-asparagus example has the merit of brevity, but little wit.)

I was disappointed in most of the results of the personality inventory approach. When I casually measure myself against Davis' creative profile (above), I score very highly. I'm confident, energetic and have wide interests. Initially, I felt flattered—or vindicated—by this but later I had some misgivings. I can identify myself almost as well in my latest horoscope: "You have your private woes, but deep down you must be aware that the real bone of contention relates to finances..." Upon reflection, the creative characteristics suggested seem very general. They could apply to most alert folks with an interest in the arts. The effort to distill a personality inventory down to the traits common to *all* creators has produced a list so general that it has nothing special to tell me about my own creative practice. In this way, trait analysis also lags behind the current thinking in creativity research. As more researchers conclude that there are many different *kinds* of creativity, trait analysis needs to respond with appropriate tests and more specific profiles. For example, Davis suggests expanding the test repertoire to look for such creative abilities as problem defining, visualization and transformation (261).

### 3. MODELS OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS

When researchers began to characterize the creative process rather than the creative person, they arrived at many interesting results that correspond well to my own experience. In this chapter I will examine some recent models and results which relate most closely to my art practice. While there are models of greater tenure, I will not discuss them in this context as they accord less with my own experience.<sup>5</sup>

#### 3.1 *Right & Left Brain Cognition*

Riding a hundred and fifty years of speculation, there comes a popular notion of how the brain—that cryptic, symmetric organ—divides the responsibilities for thought. The left hemisphere of the brain is the centre of linguistic thought and the right hemisphere... is not. This much is known: damage to the left hemisphere affects our capacity for language (Hines 225). What follows is guesswork. The right hemisphere has been variously ascribed visual imagery or executive, perceptual, non-verbal, kinesthetic, pre-verbal and appositional thought (Bogen and Bogen 257). The most popular model assigns logical, rational thought processes to the left hemisphere. The right hemisphere is in charge of the intuitive, the non-verbal, the creative. This model has a great deal of popular currency, but it is, at best, a serious over-generalization.<sup>6</sup> At worst it is bad science. However, this paradigm—of two dominant styles of thought, one verbal and one visual—seems to

If I have an honest feeling about what I am doing then it is a better work. But I don't verbalize it... There is a difference in making a work from the outside in rather than from the inside out. We use our brains in either case but in a different way. When you work from the outside of a thing you make yourself a problem, formalize it. It limits your feelings.

Nancy Grossman  
(Nemser 328)

<sup>5</sup> For example, the supernaturalist models of creativity credit a source or originating principle which is beyond observable reality, such as muses or a deity. Some of the oldest and most persistent models describe versions of miraculous insight. Plato is only the first in a long line of philosophers to ascribe creativity to an intense inspiration, "dispensation from above" (Rothenberg and Hausman 33).

<sup>6</sup> For arguments, see Bogen and Bogen, Elliott, Hendren and Hines.

be very useful to artists. In my readings, I came across several artists who talked about reaching for a non-verbal state or imagining art as a visual language/non-language. This paradigm is the basis for one of the most popular drawing texts, Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain, by Betty Edwards. My own notes are strewn with references to art as a non-verbal state:

From the creativity questionnaire (Appendix B):

"The most exciting, the most fulfilling, the most 'authentic' creative experiences are those which seem to be completely non-verbal. These things happen in a part of the head where even I, uncommonly articulate, function in a completely language-free mode. That state is intrinsically rewarding..."

"My visual practice... doesn't feel like play so much as talking to myself in a non-verbal language. 'So?' 'Perhaps so?' 'If?' 'Aha!'"

I certainly distinguish strongly between verbal and non-verbal thought, and find the latter a very powerful basis for creative activity. I regularly use informal meditation and absorbing physical activity to achieve a productive non-verbal state. Although I would hesitate to literally assign the two modes to specific hemispheres, I find the paradigm (and vocabulary) useful and resonant. In this case, the subjective merit of the model outweighs its dubious scientific basis.

...I sat staring, staring, staring—half lost, learning a new language or rather the same language in a different dialect. So still were the big woods where I sat, sound might not yet have been born. Slowly, slowly I began to put feeble scratchings and smudges of paint onto my paper, returning home disheartened, wondering, waiting for the woods to say something to me personally. Until they did, what could I say?  
Emily Carr (321)

### *3.2 Wallas: Four Stages of Creative Process*

Graham Wallas described a hypothetical model of the creative process which has become widely accepted. Although Wallas derived his model intuitively rather than empirically, few researchers have found fault with it. It corresponds well to their experience (and mine). Wallas rejects the idea of creative insights being accomplished with one blinding flash of inspiration—the aha! experience. He says, instead, that even

those insights which appear to come out of the blue are based on four steps: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification (69-72).

In the preparation stage, the creator immerses herself in all of the relevant information. This information includes a knowledge of her discipline, preliminary attempts at solutions, and the necessary constraints on solutions. Second, the information is allowed to incubate. The creator may appear to abandon totally the problem or take up another activity altogether to allow a period of undirected thought. The creator arrives at a solution (illumination), not in an isolated flash of inspiration, but as a result of this preparation and incubation. After this initial insight, the creator can examine, refine, modify and verify the solution. In the case of the artistic process, verification might better be described as execution.

It appeared that after first contemplating a book on some subject, and after giving serious preliminary attention to it, I needed a period of sub-conscious incubation which could not be hurried and was if anything impeded by deliberate thinking... Having, by a time of very intense concentration, planted the problem in my subconsciousness, it would germinate underground until, suddenly, the solution emerged with blinding clarity, so that it only remained to write down what had appeared as if in a revelation.

Bertrand Russell (195)

In my own preparation and incubation, I become a compulsive list-maker and sign-poster. I scribble lists of ideas and tasks on the backs of envelopes and flyers, and immediately discard them. I may write the same list three or a dozen times but I almost never refer to it. The important thing seems to be writing and seeing the list, not reading it. I post a flurry of little hand-drawn signs in my home and studio: keywords and quotations. These are my way of immersing myself in ideas or images I think are pivotal to the work in progress—a way to meditate on these scraps of ideas. I find it particularly important to separate the collecting of ideas from the evaluation or editing:

The first attempts are absolutely unbearable. I say this because I want you to know that if you see something worth while in what I am doing, it is not by accident but because of real intention and purpose.

Vincent Van Gogh  
(Ghiselin 54)

From the creativity questionnaire (Appendix B):

"I think it has been very important to my own creative development to learn to make these two processes operate separately. In the primary process you collect. In the secondary process, you discriminate. It is dangerously easy to start editing/culling/ analyzing too soon. On a regular day-to-day basis, the two processes operate in an integrated manner, but it is my business to pry them apart."

I simply can't return to a painting that I've left overnight. It would feel like wearing a foreign skin: how could I ever find the same touch again, or the same light?

Avigdor Arikha  
(Hofstadter 102)

Wallas' four-stage model of the creative process is one of a handful of similar descriptions. While it is serviceable and respected, some authors have proposed elaborations. Howard Gruber expands Wallas' list to include initial stages of problem finding and forming a draft or first sketch of a solution. After the insight has been verified, Gruber also finds that the individual creative idea often goes on to be variously applied to other projects (19-20). In general, however, Wallas' model is a useful basic paradigm that matches my own experience.

And in the various paintings I have done since my return from Palma to Barcelona there have always been these three stages—first, the suggestion, usually from the material; second, the conscious organization of these forms; and third, the compositional enrichment.

Joan Mirò  
(Rowell 211)

### *3.3 Other Paradigms of the Creative Process*

Psychologists' study of the creative process has produced a variety of interesting paradigms—ways of talking about creativity that I find especially resonant as an artist. I have selected a handful of the most pertinent results for brief discussion here: multiple intelligences (Gardner), Janusian thought (Rothenberg), intrinsic motivation (Amabile), special talent versus self-actualizing creativity (Maslow), and adaptors versus innovators (Kirton).

In the first of these, Howard Gardner expresses an appealing theory. He suggests that there is no single factor or measure of creativity. Instead, he describes a model of

*multiple intelligences*, relatively independent spheres of creative knowledge and activity. Each of these spheres represents a separate problem of study; they have their own genetic origin, patterns of thought and stages of development. Gardner's model includes, thus far, seven distinct types of creativity: linguistic; musical; mathematical/logical; visual/spatial; bodily-kinesthetic; social/interpersonal; and intrapersonal (Abra 414). He believes there is a genetic basis to creativity and that creativity develops in stages as children mature. His major research is in developmental theory and education. What I find appealing about Gardner's model is that it offers specialized paradigms for different types of creative practice. He allows for the possibility that both dancers and mathematicians may be creative without trying to fit their practices into one overly-general profile.

Another intriguing model is that summarized by Albert Rothenberg in Creativity and Madness: New Findings and Old Stereotypes. In this book he argues *against* popular associations between creativity and madness. Rothenberg describes and dismisses many stereotypes of creativity, including the mystique of inspiration. But Rothenberg's major contribution to the field is the model of Janusian thought. His general finding is that creative people are all highly motivated and they share specialized thinking patterns during creative activity. These patterns are conscious and rational. Rothenberg finds that at several stages in the creative process, the creator needs to consider (and accept) simultaneous opposing concepts. Janusian thought (named for the Roman god Janus, who is usually portrayed having two or more faces) is the tolerance for the contradictory, the apparently irreconcilable:

It pulls back and forth all the time, and always has, even before I thought about it. I would work flat for a while and then I would start doing sculpture. The old thing about the internal dialectic of contradicting yourself, which is cathartic—the only thing that leads to something new. I have to use contradiction in my work not only to achieve something but to avoid something else.

Robert Rauschenberg  
(Rose 59)

Multiple opposites or antitheses are conceived simultaneously, either as existing side by side or as equally operative, valid, or true. In an apparent defiance of

logic or of physical possibility, the creative person consciously... develops those formulations into integrated entities and creations (15).

Tolerance for ambiguity has been offered as a characterization of creative people by several authors. Rothenberg, however, treats it as a tool rather than a trait.

I find this ambiguity in both my studio practice and the work itself. In a statement I prepared for my defense of my graduating exhibition, the question of reconciling opposites played a prominent role. Much of the work revolved around location and dislocation, interior and exterior, control and expression, privacy and communication. Almost half of the works in the show, for example, were densely packed containers (snowdomes, boxes, crates)—but the object's interiors sometimes overwhelmed the exteriors... or overflowed them. These became metaphors to me for containment, control, repression... and defying or bursting the boundaries.

What distinguishes people who *could* be creative from those who actually are?

Teresa Amabile offers a third model of creativity with the notion of intrinsic task motivation—pursuing a project for its own sake rather than for an external reward (Kohn 52). In response to evidence that intrinsic task motivation is reduced by the offer of reward, Amabile has conducted extensive research to find that creativity is also diminished.<sup>7</sup>

The creative impulse is a genuine necessity for the imaginative artist, and the command comes from his inner life.

Alfeo Faggi  
(Heywood 47)

Amabile has even demonstrated that you can lower creativity with the promise (or even discussion) of external rewards. When highly motivated, demonstrably creative people were offered rewards, or led to discuss possible extrinsic motivations, their work

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<sup>7</sup> From my brief survey, Amabile's body of research seems unusually well-designed. She uses consensual validation by experts to determine what products are more creative; her use of control groups is solid, and she has explored several subtle variations carefully.

was worse than that of the control groups—and their own previous standards of production (Kohn 55). Amabile's findings have two important consequences for me.

First, they begin to distinguish between those who *could* create, and those who do.

Second, they suggest an awkward conflict between artmaking and academics, since reward systems like grades can actually lower creativity.

This result corresponds to my own contrasting experiences studying art at the undergraduate and graduate levels. On one hand, my undergraduate program of study came upon me almost by chance. I

already had a degree and a job. I felt uninhibited about my creative responses in the studio because I was financially secure and my academic progress was immaterial to me at the time. I found that I was adventurous, self-directed, productive and creative. In contrast, attending graduate school was a major personal and financial commitment. I gave up my job, left my home and moved a great distance to undertake the program. The stakes were high and I felt it was very important to do well (although it was not clear what "doing well" might mean). I found that under these circumstances, I was inhibited and afraid to take creative risks. I was blocked regularly. Within just a few months of starting the program, I concluded that I simply could not show unfinished work to my supervisor—any kind of feedback at all brought a project to an abrupt halt. It took the better part of a year and a half to uncover and temper my own motives adequately that neither praise nor criticism could stop the flow of ideas. I knew I was ready to prepare my graduating exhibition when I was finally able to show my supervising committee

I don't suppose you do know precisely what you are after. I don't think in the creative process anyone quite knows. They have a vague idea—a beckoning, an inkling of some truth—it is only in the process that it comes to any clarity... Of course there must be the urge, the indefinable longing to get something through in terms of plastic presentation, but results are nearly always unpredictable.

Lawren Harris  
(Carr 349)

I'm no pessimist, I don't loathe art, because I couldn't live without devoting all my time to it. I love it as the only end of my life. Everything I do connected with it gives me intense pleasure.

Pablo Picasso  
(Barr 183)

work-in-progress again. I found Amabile's results resonant and disturbing both as a student and as a teacher.

Although Abraham Maslow's major contributions to psychology lie in areas other than creativity, he makes one important distinction I would like to discuss next. Maslow found that, in focusing on creative products rather than people, he was overlooking the undeniably creative lives led by apparently ordinary people. "Unconsciously, I had assumed that creativeness was the prerogative solely of certain professionals (87)." To address this, Maslow draws a distinction between *special talent creativeness*—that creativity which produces cathedrals and theorems—and *self-actualizing creativeness*. The latter may never result in novel<sup>8</sup> creative products, but Maslow uses it to distinguish individuals who *live* creatively:

For instance, one woman, uneducated, poor, a full-time housewife and mother, did none of these conventionally creative things and yet was a marvellous cook, mother, wife and homemaker... She was in all these areas original, novel, ingenious, unexpected, inventive. I just *had* to call her creative. I learned from her and others like her that a first-rate soup is more creative than a second-rate painting... (87)

I have two reasons for dwelling on this distinction. First, it introduces the question of whether so-called ordinary people can be creative. Second, Maslow's specific example raises a spectre I cannot dispel: who is to say that this woman might not have had special talent creativeness? Poor, uneducated, and female—she never had a chance. I cannot avoid reading Maslow's distinction as one of privilege. Self-actualizing creativeness may be how creative people express their special talents in the context of a life prescribed by position or poverty.

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<sup>8</sup> Maslow is one of several researchers (along with Mumford and Gustafson, and Csikszentmihalyi and Getzels, whose models of creativity I will discuss next) to whom I referred at the beginning of Chapter 2. They all take novelty for granted as a measure of the creative product without considering the cultural specificity of this criterion. Their results demonstrate clearly the value Western art traditions place on originality *but they do not show that those traditions are universal or unquestioned.*

The final model I will look at in this section is that of problem-solving styles. M.J. Kirton distinguishes between *adaption* and *innovation*, two styles which he places along a continuum. In a 1985 paper, Ronald Goldsmith pursued this distinction to show that the use of one or the other (or some style in between) does not depend on the complexity of the problem being solved. Kirton says that adaptors and innovators are two different *types* of creators who demonstrate a preference for a particular creative approach; he does not find they represent different *levels* of creativity (Goldsmith 461).

In earlier years, I would have specific ideas for a painting—something I may have dreamed or caught a glimpse of. I don't rely on that sort of thing anymore, because once I got started, it didn't last.

Richard Diebenkorn  
(Gruen 62)

Several other researchers working on related models differ from Kirton on this last point. Mumford and Gustafson evaluated the merit of the creative products resulting from fundamentally different approaches. Did the creator work within the existing template, or forge a new one? They found that applying existing cognitive structures results in "minor contributions," that is, products of less novelty and social value. In contrast, integrating or re-organizing the cognitive structures results in "major contributions," more valuable creative products.

Csikszentmihalyi and Getzels applied a similar approach specifically to art production. They distinguished between presented problem-*solving* (roughly equivalent to Mumford and Gustafson's idea of the use of existing cognitive structures) and discovered problem-*finding* (integrating or re-organizing the cognitive structures). Csikszentmihalyi and Getzels' major area of interest is the concept of problem-finding as the key to creativity, the notion that the

A picture is not thought out and settled beforehand. While it is being done it changes as one's thoughts change. And when it is finished, it still goes on changing, according to the state of mind of whoever is looking at it.

Pablo Picasso  
(Barr 179)

basis of creative discovery is figuring out how to ask a new question. If we imagine a continuum of artmaking from one extreme to the other, copying lies on the far end, the simplest example of presented problem solving. Truly "original" works are on the other end of the spectrum, emerging from discovered problem finding (92). Their research evaluated upper year art students producing drawings under controlled circumstances. The students were asked to choose subjects from an array of materials, arrange a still life, and make a drawing. Some of the observations are especially interesting. Students who demonstrated a particular concern for problem finding (by choosing unusual or challenging objects to draw, by experimenting with arrangements, or in interview questions) produced drawings that were rated significantly more original by a panel of expert judges. To a less measurable extent, they also had greater success in their art careers (as measured by recognition in shows, galleries, journals and criticism, and art income).

There are apparent contradictions between the results described here which explore problem-solving styles. Kirton and Goldsmith find that adaption and innovation are two ends of a spectrum of problem-solving styles, and that the distinctions between them are a matter of preference rather than quality of creative product. The other teams (Mumford and Gustafson; Csikszentmihalyi and Getzels) seem to suggest that adaption is a lesser creative approach than innovation. Neither approach offered such compelling results that I could dismiss the other outright and both vocabularies have useful application in the practice of studio art. I would *like* it to be true that adaption/innovation is a choice of style rather than a standard of creativity; the more inclusive, less binary paradigm seems to allow more room for varied creative practices and for the recent

And now I will direct your attention to a remarkable fact. Artists today are still trying to decide in advance exactly what to put on a particular canvas, even a whole series of canvases. Trying to deduce their feelings from their formal intentions. And this is to take the act of painting from the wrong end; it is to paint backward, like building a house from the top down. Well, I reject it! Our intentions are rooted in what we already know, in what's already closed or accomplished. If what I paint doesn't surprise me, it certainly won't come as a revelation to anyone else.

Avigdor Arikha  
(Hofstadter 112)

questioning, in contemporary art discourse, of the primacy of "originality."

Csikszentmihalyi's and Getzels' suggestion that problem-finding (innovation) produces more creative products than problem-solving (adaption) was specifically examined in the context of adult visual artists but since those results are clearly derived in the context of Western art practices they do not address the problem of cultural specificity. For my part, my own recent shift in creative paradigms from a somewhat formulaic problem-solving approach to a more open-ended problem-finding (as described in the introduction to this paper) seems to have opened up more and richer creative possibilities in the studio.

When I began to read the work of researchers who have examined the creative process (rather than the creative person), I found many results that were corroborated by my own experience. Right-brain/left-brain cognition, Wallas' four stages and the other paradigms I have briefly examined are more inclusive and specific than the overly-general results of trait analysis. I am attracted to these models of creative process because they seem to accommodate ideas that relate more directly to my own artistic practice. However, it was models of the creative *situation* that seemed most constructive and relevant to my own practice. I will look at some of these models in the next chapter.

#### 4. CREATIVE SITUATION: FACILITATING CREATIVE PROCESS

Under what conditions do people become more creative? This is a surprisingly recent question in creativity research. Artists know that the situation affects both productivity and the product. Observations in my own journals link my work with my situation, as in this pair of entries from October 1991:

"With the snow I'm the happiest here I've ever been. It's not that I'm unhappy, I'm just distanced and disoriented. Yes, still. It's been pretty obvious in the studio. I've managed to start making work, but it's hard not to notice that it's all under two and a half feet. Little tiny obsessive reclusive elbows-in-tight objects."

"The isolation has affected my work. Sculpture got small, cryptic, personal. Drawings got very formal and controlled. This morning I realized that Graham's questions of 'dealing with the [h]edge' have also been involved all these objects floating in the middle of the page, isolated by vast margins. They are me, out on the ice floe."

In this chapter I will discuss models of the creative situation. Most of these approaches are constructive and prescriptive. They offer methods to improve or facilitate creativity. I will include both a preliminary psychological model (Vaughan) and a repertoire of my favourite techniques for creative production, drawn from a variety of sources. These are the tools and vocabulary I have found most useful in my own practice and their diverse sources reflect my own multi-disciplinary background.

##### *4.1 Creative Release and Freedom To Fail*

One of the reports venturing a model of the creative situation comes from Trevor Vaughan in "On Not Predicting the Outcome: Creativity as Adventure." (See also Amabile's work on intrinsic motivation in section 3.3 above.) However singular, the model is a satisfactory beginning. Vaughan discusses four conditions in detail: acceptance of the indeterminate; concentration; emotion; and detachment (301-5). With the first condition, the ability of the creator to *accept the indeterminate*, Vaughan advocates a surrender of control or directed thinking. I have heard this advice from a lot

of artists. I have given it myself. His second condition, *concentration*, is oddly unexpected. Other researchers have talked about the high motivation of creative people, but little attention has been paid to their need to attend to their activity. Sometimes I achieve a state of absorption in my work so deep that I can work effortlessly and continuously for seven or more hours. This is a different feeling than my drive for productivity. That drive is a conscious imposition of my will (and guilt) upon my working process. With his third condition, *emotion*, I am reminded of a study by Runco and Bahleda, who compared the implicit characteristics ascribed to artistic creativity by both lay subjects and professional artists. They asked the subjects to describe the characteristics of artistic creativity, then compared them (95). What struck me were the differences between the two lists. For example, some non-artists believed that it is important to be able to draw well to be an artist. That characteristic never appeared on the artists' lists. At the same time, artists ascribed emotion to artistic creativity; non-artists did not. For me, artmaking is very emotional, as a 1992 journal entry attests:

"I started reaching for drawing projects today, and realized that it's a very emotional process. The crazier I've gotten here lately, the more I've avoided all emotional processes. Writing, drawing, even decent movies. Oh boy, this is not constructive, creative. But I've been trying to stay steady, I think I'm afraid of becoming hysterical. I do miss it, though, that passion, spending hours at a project."

Vaughan does not specify a particular emotion. Any kind of charged situation may suffice. I've been equally productive when happy, depressed or rapt with lust and infatuation. Another 1992 journal entry reminds me that even self-destructive moods are provocative:

"My mood has been increasingly difficult over the last week. Bored and on edge. Angry, sometimes, about having to be here. By last night, I could feel the wired,

The minute something is good, people call it obsessive. It's a word that's been coined by people who can't do anything for longer than 15 minutes. I mean, was Leonardo da Vinci obsessive? Or Jan Vermeer? It's people dismissing your capacity for concentration.

Catherine Murphy  
(Gruen 242)

First, it is necessary for me to be exalted by a deep emotion.

Alfeo Faggi  
(Heywood 41)

anxious, self-destructive reactions creep in. I sat, at the grad seminar, thinking about doing a work based on cutting myself and bleeding, pressing the patterns onto paper."

In my readings, I noticed that an astonishing number of artists explicitly talked about fear as part of their creative practice. Says Robert Rauschenberg:

Even at this late date, I go into my studio, and think "Is this going to be it? Is it the end?" You see, nearly everything terrorizes me. I think that when an artist loses that terror, he's through... (Gruen 271).

The fourth condition Vaughan cites is *detachment*, neatly opposing emotion. He likens it to incubation (from Wallas' four-stage model of the creative process), and points to Zen meditational technique as one route to a productive detached state.

I found Vaughan's model of the creative situation promising but preliminary and would like to expand on it by comparing it to another model for a creative situation with which I have had experience: improvisational theatre and comedy. Keith Johnstone, inventor of *Theatresports*, developed the entire structure of that improvisational theatre game to create a setting in which actors might be creative. The key, he says, is giving improvisors the freedom to fail. *Theatresports* is an improvisation format which not only encourages the actors to take risks but also minimizes the consequences of failure.

For example, scenes are short and audience criticism is deflected onto deliberately antagonistic judges. The format has been successful by any measure. *Theatresports* is played and enjoyed across the continent, and it regularly serves as the apprenticeship for

Of course, I don't go into the studio with the idea of 'saying' something—that's ludicrous. What I do is face the blank canvas, which is terrifying.

Richard Diebenkorn  
(Gruen 62)

Fear is a vital factor in any creative work.

Chuck Jones  
(Goleman, Kaufman  
and Ray 44)

I want that release. I can't go on sheer program. At times I thought, "the more thought the greater the art," but I wonder about that and I do have to admit there's a lot that I'll just let happen and maybe it will come out the better for it.

Eva Hesse  
(Nemser 212)

I never know where I'm going with a painting. I only know where I've been, and, frankly, I believe that every painter is in a state of continual failure.

William Bailey  
(Gruen 138)

fine comics, actors and troupes.<sup>9</sup> My own mental repertoire of tools for creative thought draws on my experience of Johnstone's improvisation training (some of which overlaps with training I have had in creative writing), as well as a series of "rules to unstick a painting" which I learned from one of my undergraduate art instructors, Tony Urquhart (see Appendix A). That repertoire of creative tools includes the following:

*No blocking:* don't shut out or turn down ideas.

*No wimping:* follow through; don't chicken out; take ideas to their story limits.

*Blind offers:* do something, anything, without having any preconceptions about how it will be received; accept whatever interpretation is put on it.

*Freefall* (from the Banff writers' workshops): start your writing day by writing anything at all, the first ten or twenty minutes of freely-associated mental lint you can type; type your grocery list if that's all that's on your mind; don't edit yourself; promise yourself that your freefall is completely confidential.

*12 Rules To Unstick A Painting* include suggestions like turning it upside down, looking at it from a distance, and painting out your favourite spot. If you keep an open mind they apply to just about anything that's stuck.

These are some of my time-tested techniques for developing a creative situation in which to practice.

#### 4.2 Creativity For Everyone

Some of the most concrete work done in creativity research is under the auspices of management consulting and education. The researchers cited here are educators or professional creativity consultants rather than psychologists. The potential entrepreneurial and industrial applications of creativity have stirred many a business to finance and pursue its study. Out of that work comes a more prescriptive (rather than

We were talking about new artists and their lack of ability to conceive of failure as progress. Most of the people that I matured with insisted on failure. I once asked Bill de Kooning how he felt about some of today's painters who seemed to paint "de Koonings" all the time. He said something that Gertrude Stein said that Picasso had said: "But they can't do the bad ones!"  
Robert Rauschenberg  
(Rose 91)

<sup>9</sup> *The Kids In The Hall*, a popular comedy team currently appearing on CBC television, was formerly a successful Toronto *Theatresports* team.

predictive or descriptive) approach to creativity, and a less elite one. How can you, I, our children, our workers, all become more creative? The resulting models of creativity seem as fresh and productive to me in my (specialized) creative process as they have been for corporate leaders.

*Brainstorming* is a now-classic tool for creative activity. A group—or an individual—tackles a problem by listing all conceivable ideas. The important principle is *deferred judgment*. You completely ignore the quality of the ideas you are producing in favour of producing as many ideas, and combinations of those ideas, as possible. No editing. No criticism. No evaluation of any kind (Parnes 284). This, of course, does not solve your problem. What it does is free you to generate new approaches by postponing critical thought. A good idea may be three or four bad ideas away. You will never get to it if you stop pursuing any train of thought just because it does not look good—yet. I was introduced to brainstorming in collective writing but I find that it is equally productive for me as a solitary artist.

Edward de Bono originated the concept of *lateral thinking*. Lateral thinking is an approach to problem solving which suggests that we look sideways for new ways to think about the problem, rather than keep trying the very thought patterns that have already failed to produce a solution. De Bono is careful to say that problem solving is not necessarily the same thing as artistic creativity. However, he has received many reports from artists who find lateral thinking useful in their practice (1992 55). Techniques for provoking lateral thinking include changing the focus of your activity, pausing and challenging the problem statement. One of de Bono's recent models is the *six thinking hats*, the idea of metaphorically changing hats to access a new realm of ideas:

white hat—objective facts and figures;

red hat—emotions;

black hat—negative aspects;  
 yellow hat—hope and positive thinking;  
 green hat—creativity and new ideas; and  
 blue hat—organization of the thinking process (1985 31-32).

Another concept of de Bono's that I have found especially useful is *po*. *Po* is an invented word<sup>10</sup>, used to introduce a topic for speculation. Unlike "what if" or "just suppose", which usually introduce reasonable statements or conditions, "po" is a signal that the following statement, however illogical or contradictory, is offered as a starting point for thought or discussion (1992 163). For example, "po, Saskatoon is walking distance from Waterloo." What is po for? Like brainstorming, po represents a temporary contract to suspend judgment: yes, the topic is unwieldy but let us go on anyway. Perhaps po is a way of announcing or requesting Janusian thought.

Lateral thinking is a familiar thought tool to me from my studies in mathematics and science; it is particularly useful for inventing or discovering unexpected solutions to specific problems. When I refreshed my knowledge of de Bono's work while preparing this paper, I found the idea of po more open-ended and appropriate to a studio art practice than that of lateral thinking. While both tools help me to set out on a new mental journey, lateral thinking seems to presuppose a specific destination, a testable solution that should satisfy the problem criteria. Po is less directed; I am attempting to adopt it as another part of my creative vocabulary.

William Gordon founded a technique called *synectics* which is based on his conviction that the traditionally specialist view of creativity as an innate talent is wrong.

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<sup>10</sup> Where does the word "po" come from? De Bono invented it, and it may mean Provoking Operation (1992 164).

Gordon developed thought tools to improve creativity for anyone. Synectics contrasts innovative thought with the learning process. We learn a new concept by somehow bringing it into a familiar context, *making the strange familiar*. We make a connection between the new and that which we already know. By contrast, innovative thought results from breaking known connections (or preconceptions) to see things anew, *making the familiar strange* (252). Gordon says the tool to accomplish both these ends (learning and innovative thought) is the use of metaphor: *direct analogy*, *personal analogy*, and *symbolic analogy* (analogy containing conflicting images) (254). The use of synectics requires the application of analogies to break preconceptions or forge new links. One of the charms of synectics is that it treats learning—and, by extension, teaching—as a creative activity. The inventive use of analogies helps connect new lessons to the student's previous experience.

#### 4.3 Zen

My final model for the creative situation is Zen. Zen is a form of Buddhism, centred on meditation and intuition, which has been widely appropriated and Westernized, particularly by the artistic community. I am only one of many artists who has found creative guidance and insight in the philosophy of Zen without necessarily accepting, comprehending or even investigating the Buddhist faith. Why does Zen appeal to me as an artist? Zen is not a religion, it is a way.<sup>11</sup> It is thinking without thinking. Zen accesses the subconscious through emptying the mind, or truly engaging with simple activity or work. It overcomes dualistic mindsets and discourages over-intellectualization. In many ways it resembles de Bono's notion of po and Rothenberg's

<p>When one is painting one does not think.  Raphael  (Peter 377)</p>
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<sup>11</sup> It is fundamental to the notion of Zen that it defies definition. Explanation is far beyond the scope of this paper. Interested readers are encouraged to try D.T. Suzuki's What is Zen? New York: Harper & Row, 1972.

Janusian thought. Its appeal is increased by the fact that Zen has a sense of humour, and little patience for vanity and self-absorption.

My own interest in Eastern "ways" began over a decade ago with a revelatory theatre workshop under a T'ai Chi master. Zen and Tao (another Eastern religious philosophy) first came alive for me there in the context of creativity and they have been a source of clarity and challenge ever since. I could never describe myself as practicing Zen. But the best way I know to think creatively (and healthily) is to *try* to practice what I understand Zen to be. Even my recent studio practice has developed from Zen-related ideas of letting go of the material and thinking without thinking. My interaction with my supervisor evolved into a Zen-like student-master relationship. She would offer cryptic, provocative, open-ended comments on my process and I would reflect upon them. This 1992 journal entry typifies that interaction:

Note from Susan suggested I read it, shred it and see what I remember. Didn't shred it, it's too funny. But if I close it and put it away, here's what I remember:

She wrote it at 3 a.m., is she worried about me, or a night owl? She starts by suggesting "give up". Change my idea of what art is. Absence is more than presence. Throw out stuff indiscriminately. Throw out old work. Reliquary. Mouth. Tunnel with clear walls. Full of stuff. Vulnerable. Unveiled.

Zen-like thought (I imagine it as "meditation without a license") directs my acting, my writing,<sup>12</sup> and my visual art practice. Zen and Zen-like models come up many times in the words of other artists (see sidebars). Zen qualities emerged in creativity research: detachment and acceptance of the

When I met [John Cage], he said that I was a "natural" Zen. I assume that's a compliment, and I don't really care if it isn't—which might be "natural" Zen.

Robert Rauschenberg  
(Rose 47)

Art work comes straight through a free mind—an open mind. Absolute freedom is possible. We gradually give up things that disturb us and cover our mind. And with each relinquishment, we feel better... To recognize and overcome fear and pride, in order to have freedom of mind, is a long process.

Agnes Martin  
(Gruen 79)

<sup>12</sup> My recent script, Suffragette Koans, completed in my first year at Saskatoon, is modelled after or inspired by Zen teaching stories, the *koans*.

indeterminate (Vaughan); Janusian thought reconciling opposing concepts (Rothenberg);  
po (De Bono). In my own practice, creativity tools  
like brainstorming and lateral thinking are what I use  
when I want to *do* something about a problem;  
meditation is what I use when I want to accomplish  
something *without* doing, or without over-thinking a problem.

When an artist reasons, it's because he no  
longer understands anything.

André Derain  
(Peter 377)

#### *4.4 The Creative Situation: Conclusion*

The widest range of constructive findings in creativity with direct application to my studio art practice have come from models, not of the creative person, but of the creative process and especially the creative situation. These ideas and tools are some of most valuable that I will take away from the writing of this paper.

## 5. ASKING CREATORS ABOUT CREATIVITY

There are a few areas of recent investigation which promise more of an insider's perspective than do the models thus far examined. Many researchers are calling for more complex models, designed to encompass the actual experiences of the creative person rather than to match the profiles developed by psychometric testing.<sup>13</sup> I will discuss three approaches here: polymathy (Root-Bernstein), the polyphonic creative process (Marsh and Vollmer), and the evolving systems approach (Gruber).

Robert S. Root-Bernstein suggests that most successful creators are polymaths, and that their cross-disciplinary knowledge is an important component of their creativity. Root-Bernstein's interest is in curricula for the gifted and the rationale for a liberal education. He feels that "a common body of skills underlies imaginative thought in all disciplines from the sciences and technology to the arts and literature (18)." Not only does the author make a convincing case for the polymathy, he offers a list of what those common skills might be:

- pattern recognition;
- pattern forming;
- analogizing;
- abstracting;
- mental visualization;
- physical modeling;
- kinesthetic thinking;

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<sup>13</sup> Complex models built up from interview data and the interpretation of essay-style questions are difficult to defend as well as construct. Some subjects, however, demand multifarious methods. I am reminded that Kinsey's pioneering interview-based research in human sexuality was criticized within the scientific community for its methods. Yet Kinsey represented a major breakthrough in our understanding, not just of sexuality, but of how we might study it.

aesthetics;  
 playacting or internalizing;  
 manipulative skill;  
 playing; and  
 transformational thinking (20).

This analysis of creativity is attractive to me because it rationalizes my circuitous educational history.<sup>14</sup> Root-Bernstein's skills list corresponds to my experience in which pattern recognition and mental visualization are important creative tools, often overlooked. Analogizing and transformational thinking also help me apply knowledge from one field to another. Based on my own experiences I would agree that broad knowledge enriches (but does not cause) creativity.

Other researchers calling for more complex models of creativity include Diane T. Marsh and Judith Vollmer. Their 1991 publication, "The Polyphonic Creative Process: Experiences of Artists and Writers," took the apparently revolutionary approach of actually asking artists and writers to describe their own creative processes and to evaluate several currently-favoured models in the context of their own experience. The questionnaire encouraged richly detailed response and the authors *assumed* creativity to be multidimensional. The authors' conclusions are not directly comparable to rest of the models surveyed in this paper. Marsh and Vollmer characterized neither the creative person, process, nor situation. Instead, they sought some understanding of

In the last few months, I have become more conscious of how my work takes form. It sometimes happens unexpectedly. Just as I wake up, a series of three sculptures may present themselves somewhere that seems high over my head in my consciousness. They simply materialize, whole and themselves, in a rather stately way, and stand there, categorical in their simplicity. This can happen anywhere, not necessarily just after waking, but, characteristically, without any preparation on my part. Sometimes a single piece will appear; never more than three at once. I cannot make them all. Less than a quarter of them ever reach actuality.

Anne Truitt (93)

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<sup>14</sup> I'm not a dilettante, I'm a polymath!

why (rather than how) creativity happens. The authors conclude that the most effective model to accommodate the responses is derived from psychoanalytic theory: a transitional sphere of activity between internal (private) and external (shared public) realms.<sup>15</sup> I applaud their research style, and purpose: "...any model of the creative process must have the scope to deal with the diversity and complexity so evident in [the artists' and writers'] responses... Clearly, a satisfactory model of the creative process must encompass all of our humanity (115)." Their questions and my responses to them are found in Appendix B. My responses were written *before* I read the body of their article; some of these responses were later incorporated into this paper when I found they corresponded to other theories I chose to include.

I have briefly introduced Howard Gruber (see section 3.2 above), whose fundamental model of creativity follows from Wallas' four stages. Gruber dismisses trait analysis as simplistic, limited and culturally specific.<sup>16</sup> He is even more concerned, however, by its effect on the field of study:

There are really two points at issue here. First, the quantitative approach to creativity necessarily forces the criterion level downward; second, the quantitative approach prevents and perhaps even prohibits serious scrutiny of the individual (6).

This matches my own discovery that the personality inventory (described in chapter 2) was overly general. Gruber advocates, instead, a detailed case study method focussing on extraordinary and accomplished creative people:

We reject the idea that one grand theory can account for all creative work. On the other hand, we insist that each creative person is a coherent knowing system whose functioning we must understand (4).

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15 "The concept of a transitional sphere appears to be one fruitful avenue for exploration; moreover, its usefulness does not necessarily require acceptance of psychoanalytic assumptions regarding the origins of transitional phenomena (Marsh and Vollmer 115)."

16 "What is pertinent, important, and rare at one place, in one domain, at one moment in history will be irrelevant or commonplace elsewhere. On the island of Tonga almost everyone can juggle well, and many beautifully (Gruber 1989 5)."

Gruber accepts a fairly conventional understanding of creative work. It should be original, purposeful and felicitous—that is, compatible with human needs and values. His approach to analysis is encapsulated in his *evolving systems approach* which identifies several key qualities to creative work (4-5). In the first of these, he describes creative work as *developmental and systemic*, suggesting that creative activity is not an singular experience but a series of evolutionary creative acts which take place in and around one another rather than in isolation. Ideas, you might say, are conceived in families. His notions that *creative work is pluralistic and interactive* further suggest that a creator explores several different families of ideas over the same period of creative activity and that cross-fertilization (interaction) between them is an important part of the process. He also finds that *creative work is constructionist*: new ideas are built upon the existing body of work. Finally, Gruber describes creative work as *experientially sensitive*. That is, a creator's practice and production is affected by the context in which it takes place. The creator's experiences colour the creative work.

All of these qualities speak to the presence and evolution of the creative worker behind the work. Using the evolving systems approach as the basis of study represents a major commitment to understanding the creator *and* her body of work (which Gruber calls "networks of enterprise"), rather than isolated creative products.

My work has to do with who I am and how I figure things out. And what I do is this: I have an idea in my mind, and in my mind the idea is perfect. In my mind I go through all the construction of a piece; I take it all the way to the end. Then, of course, you face reality. You have to actually start doing the piece and so, from completion—the mind's idea—you go to the absolute beginning. What I do when I'm building a piece is travel the distance from where I am to its completion and back again, imagining what I want out here and making the steps, building them in my mind. I know that if I get into trouble along the path, what I can do is go back, say a quarter of the way and start from there. So it's always a matter of negotiating the space between the reality of where I am and where the point of completion is in my mind.

Jackie Winsor  
(Gruen 42)

Some interesting principles are emerging in Gruber's work and directing his future research. Gruber distinguishes between *deviation-minimizing* and *deviation-amplifying* processes. Most people (like many mechanical and social systems) work to reduce difference, to correct their deviations from the norm. "But under some conditions deviation-amplifying systems are viable, and they are always necessary for creative work (8)." What systems? How do creative people accept and expand on the unexpected variation? I look forward to future results.

The most interesting area of Gruber's research to me as an artist is the notion of studying bodies of work rather than a single creative product. One advantage is the realization that groups of related projects interact constructively as part of the creative process. One project stalls? The creator takes up another. A work is finished? A related activity is soon at hand. Pursuing a body of related work over a long period of time apparently also helps allow for the ebb and flow of energy, interruptions and solutions. I would like to illustrate the importance of this with an extended example taken from my own studio practice. I think the following section demonstrates how, in artmaking, the development of one creative product is inextricably tied to an entire body of work.

### *5.1 A Body of Work: My Own Experience*

In this section I will recall the development of some key pieces in my latest body of work. The reader will see how one work is linked to another. In fact, some of the most influential pieces—works which made the rest of the exhibition possible—were never developed to the point where they could be exhibited.

When I began the graduate program, I resolved to take apart my creative process and examine it carefully. I hoped the reassembly would take me some place fresh and better.

Ideas are cheap. I make ideas for a living.<sup>17</sup> What I did not know was how I chose amongst them. In the fall of 1991 I drew up a list of my own criteria. I discovered that they were all negative: the list was all reasons *not* to develop a particular idea. These self-imposed reasons not to make art included such inhibitions as "the subject matter violates my privacy" and "the work couldn't be moved." So I posted that list (Appendix C) in my studio and set out, over the course of the year, to break every one of my own rules. That was the beginning of the body of work that comprises my Master's exhibition. Breaking each rule was a way of defying my own inhibitions. Granting myself permission to make work that was, for example, silly, in poor taste or non-archival freed me from "high art" and self-imposed dignity. Suddenly I could explore less-than-intellectual themes and try kitschy materials.

Not everything led to successful work but a lot of it improved the *working*. I wrote on walls. I feathered a fish. I glued together a pinwheel and a clockwork to make a pointless twitching confection of pink and silver that is still the heartbeat of my studio. I pumped water through a pair of nipples mounted on twin tin tambourines, souvenirs of Niagara Falls. I started to recognize a feeling I had previously associated only with writing, the feeling of delighting and outraging myself at the same time. Granting myself permission to make work I could not move led to a structure built into my studio—a barbed-wire cone overlaid with a skin of paper—a place in which to think about my mother. The making was a meditation. There was just enough room inside for a careful person to crawl in, sit, and watch the sun filter through the walls. This piece was never completed, never titled, never shown. However, it led directly to my first snowdome, a

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17 As a technical writer (also playwright and sometime copywriter), ideas are my livelihood. In fact, almost every job of any kind I've held has evolved into idea-making once my employer discovers it's what I do best.

piece about my mother. These rules and the barbed-wire cone led me to the most difficult problem of all: how to reconcile exposure and safety?

I built the first snowdome, *My mother should have thrown a party when he died*, in November of 1991. It contains a five-member family of chess pieces: a white queen, her three pawns, and a black king. If you shake the dome (which does not contain water), a flurry of black and blue metallic confetti tumbles over their heads. One little pawn is painted gold, and the title text is written around the base. A snowdome can both express and contain my fiercest thoughts. It is a tiny handheld world. It is tacky and approachable. It is funny and black. My work with the snowdomes introduced a new creative process. They did not take well to being planned or analyzed. They leaked. They broke. They changed. After this, I had more success covering my worktable with "stuff" and empty snowdomes, and letting myself play. Sometimes, now, I can fix a sensation in my head alongside the image of some object, and then wait for my reptile brain to reconcile the two inside a glass sphere. It seems to be important not to think-then-make. Instead, I am thinking-making-thinking-making all the time.

My latest body of work is not exclusively snowdomes, but they represent the clearest path from the "think-then-make" approach to the "thinking-making-thinking-making" approach. The first snowdomes were illustrational. They contained a fairly literal representation of a short text. I can remember the first snowdome *without* text on its base, a small piece filled with gears and springs from broken pocket watches. I made it. I glued clock numbers around the plastic bell. I knew it was right, but I probably spent two weeks trying to figure out what words I should put on the base. Every day, the little snowdome grew murkier, filling up with gold-coloured grunge from the watch pieces. I loved the way it made me feel, the wordless things it said, but it took me a fortnight to

realize that the key word was "wordless." The snowdome, *Time Piece #1*, already said everything it needed to, expressing rather than illustrating.

The untitled, unfinished barbed-wire cone in my studio led me directly to making a snowdome. The first illustrational snowdomes led me to making the later, more expressive, less literal snowdomes. Eventually I would work on as many as six or seven snowdomes at the same time. When one stalled, I would pick up another. If a snowdome leaked, I'd pry it open and redistribute the gooey contents to other domes. After I mounted my exhibition my work table was still littered with the debris of snowdomes that hit dead ends during the year. As Gruber suggests in his evolving systems approach to the study of creativity, to understand how any one of those snowdomes in my recent show was developed, we must consider the development of the entire body of work. That body of work includes other projects, complete and incomplete, many dead ends, and works that may well develop in the future.

### *5.2 Toward More Complex Models*

To me it is clear that only complex models of creativity can accommodate a range of creative practices. In particular, Gruber's evolving systems approach promises to do more than make room for the creative person within the process. It allows for evolution, and for the creator to be affected by her life and surroundings. It begins, tentatively, to address a question, of vital importance to artists, which was formerly overlooked or dismissed: How does the creative *life* work?

## 6. CONCLUSION

Creativity research would have made more progress sooner if psychologists (and artists) had not fallen for the romantic myths of the artist. There is something more going on here than white-hot flashes of genius. Clearly this is a complex area of study in which the most remarkable accomplishments are still ahead. However, in my view, some of the most interesting results available today are from Teresa Amabile's research on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Her observations change my approach to teaching, and explain several projects (of mine and of my students) that came to mystifying dead ends. I wish I could draw some well-informed conclusion as to whether adaption and innovation are different styles (as described by Kirton) or different qualities of creativity (as Csikszentmihalyi's and Getzels' findings suggest).<sup>18</sup> I have used both styles and, while I believe innovation (problem-finding) has brought me richer results, I don't know if that is the case for most creators. Trait research, with which I began this paper, seems to be a foundation of the field rather than the future. We may have all we are going to find in the creative profile. I am still uncertain, even after all my readings, who is served by efforts to predict creativity and I am disturbed by the possible implications for education.

What is also clear to me is that artists frame their creative processes in the context of several different models.<sup>19</sup> I think it is important to be conscious that I am working within a *model* of creativity, and that the model itself is a creative tool. I can change my

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18 I would especially like to see Csikszentmihalyi's and Getzel's research on artists updated/repeated in the context of contemporary art discourse on pluralism, cultural diversity and "originality."

19 Wittkower and Wittkower argue persuasively that many aspects of these models are historically and culturally specific. "Under certain conditions and in certain periods, the artists lived up to expectation." (293) Through an historical survey they demonstrate that artists' creative behaviour is framed and influenced by cultural conventions of thought specific to their time. "This statement...militates most strongly against the existence of a timeless constitutional type of artist." (293)

model and I suspect it is important to accept alternate models. Changing models is a change of mental set, like switching the colour of my "thinking hat." I am happy to accept the idea that several apparently contradictory models may *all* be true. In fact, I am not interested in the development of a single model of creativity. My secret identity as a former math student prepares me especially well to embrace multiple truths.

Mathematicians deal in models, not Truth. What is the sum of 1 and 11? Is your answer 12? Are you sure? I could make an equally convincing argument for 0, or 100.<sup>20</sup> I am perfectly content with the notion that all three answers are correct, in different number systems.

Overall, I found that models which attempted to generalize about the creative person, and encompass all creators in one profile, were interesting but too broad to be useful to me. Results derived from modelling the creative process corresponded better with my own experience. The work being done toward facilitating the creative process by developing models of the creative situation was the most useful of all. Many of these ideas matched my own techniques for creative production and all of the suggestions will go into my creative tool kit for a lengthy trial. Finally, I think that the most promising work is still ahead—the development of more complex, individualized models of creativity. It seems that psychological research in creativity proceeds like the development of twentieth century physics: as a sequence of setbacks. Progress is achieved by tearing down simple models and building new increasingly complex models upon the rubble. From the ambitious but incomplete body of creativity research, I have extracted fragmentary results of special interest to the artist. I think the most promising

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20 How might  $1 + 11 = 0$ ? "Modular" arithmetic is like doing addition and subtraction on the face of a clock. In the closed set  $\{0, 1, 2, \dots, 11\}$ , adding 11 to 1 brings you around the "clock" to zero ("noon"), the additive identity.

How might  $1 + 11 = 100$ ? We commonly use a base ten notation. What if 1 and 11 represent values in base two, or "binary"?  $1_2$  is the same as  $1_{10}$  but  $11_2$  equals  $3_{10}$  and our sum,  $1_2 + 11_2 = 100_2$ , or  $4_{10}$ .

direction is Gruber's evolving systems approach because it relates most closely to my own experience as an artist and because it is attempting to answer larger questions about the *life* of the artist and the *body* of work which surround the isolated creative product.

Gruber's research is trying to answer the question I ask myself every day, "What does an artist do?"

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**APPENDIX A****Urquhart's 12 Rules To Unstick A Painting**

## How to Unstick a Painting

by Tony Magheart  
("kindly, old professor")

1. change your utensil
2. turn it upside-down (work on it!)
3. leave it alone
4. "shock spot" - paint it out later
5. think back to the original idea or drawing
6. what was the impetus?
7. place painting in poor light or a unusual spot
8. look at it in a mirror
9. look out for equal areas, equal length, equal intensities
10. look at inspirational art
11. kill your darlings - no one part of a painting is untouchable
12. put a colored glare over everything
12. ask somebody else.

**APPENDIX B**

**Creativity Questionnaire (Marsh & Vollmer)**

1. How would you describe your own creative process? For example, what motivates you to create, and what are your experiences during and following creative activity?

I am motivated to create by a unexplained preoccupation with particular ideas, materials, objects and/or images. If I'm feeling positive about the healthiness of artmaking, I'd say that I "play" with these preoccupations in a uncritical, non-verbal way until patterns emerge and I get a more concrete picture of what I want to do with them. When artmaking doesn't seem so healthy, I'd admit that I get obsessed with those ideas/images, and worry at them—tonguing a loose tooth, picking at a scab—to find out why.

That initial preoccupation may be with a concept I'm having trouble articulating. It may be a response to a strong, intricate, moving event or stimulus (Peter Greenaway films, for instance). It may a response to something I've mis-seen: I once caught a glimpse, while driving on the highway, of something I thought was a pink chenille bathrobe hanging (on a coat hanger!) in the trees by the roadside. I don't believe I actually saw a bathrobe, but I am more interested in the mis-perceived image than in going back and learning the truth.

The most exciting, the most fulfilling, the most "authentic" creative experiences are those which seem to be completely non-verbal. These things happen in a part of the head where even I, uncommonly articulate, function in a completely language-free mode. That state is intrinsically rewarding.

Generally I would describe creative activity as a lot of fishing about. You gather together all sorts of things (concrete and abstract) that might be relevant to what you're working on. You stir. Then you ignore it all for a

while and let things ripen. Do something else. Clean the studio. Work on the craft-heavy aspect of some other piece. Carry a sketchbook with you everywhere you go, and doodle. Try anything. Eventually a "right" thing comes to mind.

2. Which of your own psychological needs are met during the creative process? For example, does the process allow you to withdraw temporarily into an inner world, to counteract depressions, or to achieve a degree of order and control not possible in the external world?

The creative process fulfills (or temporarily subdues) an urgent need to make myself understood. I feel like the unwritten subtext of all of my work is "Don't you see? Can't you see it the way I do? Do you get it yet?" I have something pent-up inside me, a huge fertility, something so juicy and seething that I despair sometimes of controlling its release. In my writing, for instance, I feel like there's so much I understand that I must convey that knowledge to others—share an insight, illustrate a character.

3. It has been suggested that a central function of creative activity is to increase the artist's understanding and mastery of reality. To what extent has this been your experience? •

I am supremely confident of my mastery of reality, and changing reality at that. Better to say that I want to express my understanding of that reality.

"Here, here's how I think things work."

4. Many writers have noted the similarity between creative activity and imaginative play. Both deal with a world of fantasy, which is invested with energy and emotion, and is taken very seriously. To what extent do you feel your creative activity is similar to imaginative play?

My writing is very similar to imaginative play. I create, act out, mouth lines, react, over-react along with the scenes and stories I write. I participate freely in the imaginative world of my own writing, as I write. My visual practice doesn't feel the same. Energy, yes. Emotion, yes. Taking it seriously, absolutely. It doesn't feel like play so much as talking to myself in a non-verbal language. "So?" "Perhaps so?" "If?" "Aha!"

5. It has been suggested that creative activity allows the artists to build a bridge between the "autistic," subjective world of the isolated individual and the "realistic," shared, external world. This "transitional sphere" between internal and external reality has been called the "illusionistic" world of the artist, characterized by imaginative processes which are sharable. To what extent do you feel that you occupy this transitional or illusionistic territory when you create, or that your works serve as such a bridge between internal and external reality?

I feel like a translator, a mediator, between the two. I don't "occupy" that space between the two worlds, I am engaged in bridging it. I am in the same world(s) as everyone else. I just feel equipped and compelled to cross over.

6. Works of art often bear a strong stamp of individuality. To what extent do your own works reflect your uniqueness and sense of identity, and how important has that been to you?

My objective is often, perhaps always, to express my uniqueness/identity, to help people see the way I do. (I think of this as showing them my "point of view" in the more literal sense of the expression. That is, I want to show the audience how things look from where I am, not tell them my opinion.)

On the other hand, any reasonably clever reader/viewer could catalogue characteristics of my style that are alarmingly consistent from work to work. I think that's effect rather than cause.

7. Many artists have described creativity as a journey of self-discovery. For example, T.S. Eliot wrote that "the poet does not know what he has to say until he has said it." And Vincent van Gogh wrote to his brother, "I am an artist'... means 'I am seeking'." To what extent has your own creative work represented a quest for self-discovery?

Yes! This is why it's so important to make the studio a safe place to fail, a place for experimentation and exploration. You search, you wade about in the murk, you pick out little shiny bits of discovery that interest you, and tomorrow find out what pulls them all together.

8. Psychologists have pointed to the presence of both "primary" and "secondary" process thinking in creativity. The primary process is emotional, intuitive, primitive, and holistic, whereas the secondary process is intellectual, logical, rational, and analytical. To what extent do you feel your own emotions and/or intellect are important in your creative work? Do you feel they operate separately or in an integrated manner?

I think it has been very important to my own creative development to learn to make these processes operate separately. In the primary process you collect. In the secondary process, you discriminate. It is dangerously easy to start editing/culling/analyzing too soon. On a regular day-to-day basis, the two processes operate in an integrated manner, but it is my business to pry them apart.

9. To what extent do you choose to create and to what extent do you feel compelled to create?

I am strongly compelled to create. I chose this career only after trying not to create, and failing. I am, at best, preoccupied with creativity (and productivity) and at worst, obsessed.

I do make informed, considered decisions about what to create, what media to use, and to what extent I allow creative activity to run the rest of my life.

10. Much has been made of the torment, distress, and blocking that accompany the creative process. To what extent is your own creative activity accompanied by frustration and torment?

I believe strongly that ideas are cheap. Maybe not for everyone, but it has always been my experience that ideas come quickly and fluently. I find that I am well-equipped with mental tools to jumpstart creativity.

Furthermore, I practice several types of creative activity. If I am blocked in one, I pursue another to change "set." Consequently, any substantial torment or distress associated with my creative activity has much more to do with their reception and interpretation than with my own production.

"Was the director crazy? What possessed the actor to interpret that line like that?"

11. It was Freud's view that creativity is essentially "sublimation," an effort to satisfy unconscious instinctual impulses (e.g. sexual and aggressive). He considered artistic activity to be a form of "wish fulfillment" similar to dreaming. To what extent is that view consistent with your own experience?

If artistic activity is the sublimation of sexual and aggressive impulses, then my own artistic activity is remarkably unsuccessful.

I can't substantiate this—if it's happening, it's happening in a part of my mind to which I have no access. Who knows?

12. Langer asserted that works of art are symbolic representations of the emotional life of human beings. To what extent do you feel that this is an accurate description of your work?

I don't grasp this concept very well, either. Does Langer mean my art represents all of our emotional lives, or someone's in particular, or just my own? My art no doubt expresses my own emotional life but I doubt that it always represents it.

13. May has written that the artist and the neurotic share an increased sensitivity and awareness. However, the artist is able to channel that knowledge productively into art, while the neurotic is not. Is this view consistent with your own experience?

I *believe* I'm more sensitive and aware than most people. I can't speak for neurotics. Does this mean that my practice is the only thing between me and mental illness?

14. It has been said that we are all "divided selves." For example, Jung has emphasized the differentiation of many components of personality that must precede the achievement of true integration. To what extent has your creativity fostered differentiation and integration?

I think this is true inasmuch as it relates to self-discovery (question 7). I am continually re-examining myself as part of that journey of self-discovery. I have actually spoken of it as taking myself (or my methods) apart, examining the components and putting myself together again. If Jung is referring to some unconscious process (as he so often is) of differentiation or disintegration then I don't know.

15. Please feel free to add anything that might help us in understanding your creative process, including any completed or uncomplete work.

**APPENDIX C**

**Reasons Not To**

Linda's favourite reasons for rejecting ideas:

- It's not controlled/finished use of materials!
- It might damage the workspace!
- The work couldn't be shown!
- The work couldn't be moved!
- The work couldn't be moved with a Chevette!
- I can't afford the materials!
- The subject material violates my privacy!
- The subject material violates someone else's privacy!
- It's slight!
- It's derivative!
- It's not serious!
- It might even be whimsical!
- It's funny!
- It's got no content, just formal exploration of materials!
- It's not planned all the way through!
- The materials aren't archival!

Some good advice I've received this year:

"Turn your practice upside-down, do things you wouldn't normally do."

"Dislocated? Disoriented? Do work about that."

"Look at the specific rather than the general."

"Where is the emotion in the finished work?"

"Think about why you're concerned with 'productivity'."

"Develop the piece as a whole rather than letting one part get too far ahead of another."

"You've only got two years."

- It's decorative!
- It's not in good taste!
- It's breakable!
- It's silly!