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# **ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine**

## **A Collective Response to the Collected Works of**

**D.W. Winnicott**

**With artwork and written responses from the Winnicott  
Wednesdays Artist Art Psychotherapist Collective.**

**Beth Hoyes, Helen Omand and Deba Anna Salim**

As a collective of artist art psychotherapists called Winnicott Wednesdays, we were excited to be asked to respond to the publication of Winnicott's Collected Works in January 2017. The request prompted us to think afresh about our group title and its meaning to us. The more we thought about it, the more we became aware of the influence of Winnicott's work on us as art psychotherapists, artists and beings.

Our name, Winnicott Wednesdays, started as a nickname for our regular Wednesday meetings and informal de-briefs while we were training to be art psychotherapists at Goldsmiths, University of London. The name caught on as a play on alliteration, and part homage to Winnicott, whose work many of us were encountering for the first time. We see it as a playful name, reflecting our engagement, as well as our reverence and irreverence towards the experiences of learning and taking on aspects of psychoanalytic theory. The group developed into a more formalised collective when we graduated, with

the aims of supporting our practice as artists and art psychotherapists, putting on group exhibitions of artwork (we are currently planning our fourth) and running workshops. Over time we came to see our name as reflecting the holding function that the group has had for us over the years.

Due to the collected nature of the publication we were asked to respond to, we decided to suggest a collected response from our group, starting with asking the question; 'How does the work of Winnicott influence your practice as an artist and art psychotherapist?' As part of contributing we asked for small or big responses, both visual and written. We were keen to explore how Winnicott's theories and ideas had permeated our thinking and to see how individual members would respond to the brief. Reminding ourselves of Winnicott's writing for the purposes of this article, we could recognise how far-reaching his ideas are. A considerable amount of art psychotherapy theory within the UK that we are familiar with references Winnicott, and often expands on his ideas to include the artwork in sessions and art making processes, for example, Margarita Wood transposes mother, child and transitional object onto the triangle of therapist, client, artwork calling it a 'triangulation of the potential space' (Wood 1984).

While writing this article and thinking about Winnicott's influence on art psychotherapists, and on us as a group, some debates around his work came to mind. Susan Hogan raised feminist arguments that Winnicott's theories put all responsibility/blame on the mother rather than giving more consideration to other relationships such as father, community and sociocultural factors, reminding us that he wrote in a political post-war context where women were being pressurised back into the domestic sphere (Hogan 1997). When considering Winnicott's onus on the mother we found that we tended to use his concepts somewhat differently, seeing the 'mother' as more fluid rather than gendered, meaning a parent, carer or therapist can carry out the 'mother role' in relation to practicing the concepts whether they identify as male, female or other. The arguments around this are complex and many layered and we found they generated thoughts for us around what it means to be a group of 'women' artists, art psychotherapists, and feminists, who have appropriated the name of a male theorist and clinician, choosing to use some

elements of his work over others, and we must hold these tensions in mind. These ongoing debates show some of the ways in which Winnicott's theories are alive today and continue to be relevant and reviewed amongst practicing art psychotherapists and professionals within related fields.

Our group's responses to Winnicott's work, together with an awareness of the literature, suggest that as art psychotherapists and artists we owe a great deal to his work. Its impact on our understanding of the development of our inner worlds and interactions with and within the world around us has been fundamental to understanding our clients' needs and the way we practice. In this article we will first briefly summarise the theories of Winnicott that we feel relate to the group's artwork and writing. We do this to connect or re-familiarise readers, and ourselves, with the theory before we view the responses. We then present the group's visual and written responses, concluding with our final thoughts.

### **An overview of our selection of Winnicott's theories**

The pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott spent many years observing hundreds of mothers and infants interacting, which informed his therapeutic practice and the development of his considerable contribution to psychoanalytic theory. Winnicott's theories emphasise the importance of the relationship between caregiver and child: from the moment the child is born they are always in relation to the environment or climate (the emotional experience) provided by the caregiver. This gave rise to his famous declaration that 'there is no such thing as an infant', which he later explained as 'meaning of course, that whenever one finds an infant one finds maternal care, and without maternal care there would be no infant' (Winnicott, 1960. p.587).

Winnicott wrote about what contributes to a 'holding environment', which he also related to creating a 'facilitating environment' within therapy (Winnicott, 1965). This applies to the tactile experience of being held but also the capacity for a caregiver to understand what an infant needs; providing a

sense of being 'held' on different levels. Winnicott writes about a well-timed interpretation in therapy as providing the client with a deep experience of being held without the need for physical contact (Winnicott, 1988 p. 61-2).

When Winnicott writes about the 'mirror role of mother and family' (Winnicott, 1971) he suggests a process whereby the baby finds her or his self in the mother's face, reflecting back the infant's experiences and expressions, allowing the child to gradually internalise a sense of being seen and understood as a unique individual within the world. It is essentially about the caregiver assisting the process for the infant to become oneself over time without projecting their own fears, anxieties or expectations onto the infant. Progressively, the child is able to depend less on the faces of their mother, father and family as a means of 'getting back the self' (Winnicott, 1971, p.158). Winnicott proposed that this concept is key in the therapeutic process including an awareness of interpretations in therapy as being a gradual process of 'giving the patient back what the patient brings' (Winnicott, 1971, p. 158).

Winnicott noted the importance of the mirroring process in feeling real. 'Feeling real is more than existing; it is finding a way to exist as oneself and to relate to objects as oneself' (Winnicott, 1971, p. 158). We are reminded of Dr. Seuss' words 'Today you are you that is truer than true. There is no one alive who is youer than you' (Dr. Seuss, 1959, p. 1). These words also seem to chime in with Winnicott's concept of the 'true self' relating to the authenticity of self, whereas the 'false self' was seen as a façade of defenses in response to the demands of the environment understood as often resulting from a need to comply with others' expectations (Winnicott, 1960). In our current society, with the all-prevailing performative world of social media where versions of the self can be carefully manipulated, his thinking in these areas seems important to keep in mind.

Winnicott questioned the expectation for a child to appear 'happy' or 'sweet' all the time. He writes:

'What is a normal child like? Does he just eat and grow and smile sweetly? No, that is not what he is like. The normal child, if he has

confidence in mother and father, pulls out all the stops. In the course of time, he tries out his power to disrupt, to destroy, to frighten, to wear down, to waste, to wangle, and to appropriate . . . At the start he absolutely needs to live in a circle of love and strength (with consequent tolerance)' (Winnicott, 1984, p. 115).

Winnicott's down to earth language and sensitive observations of real life caregiver and child relationships challenged idealised views of mother and child that we still find in society today. His article 'Hate in the Countertransference' (Winnicott, 1947) showed ambivalent feelings, hateful feelings specifically, to be normal and understandable between mother and child. He used his observations and own experiences as a care giver and analyst to talk about the importance of acknowledging hate in the countertransference between patient and clinician, stressing that hate is important developmentally and that infants must learn to hate so that they can learn to love.

When thinking about Winnicott's theories on the nature of play in development and everyday life we discussed a documentary Beth had seen based in the Arctic (Natures Weirdest Events, 2016). After a long hard winter a husky owner looked out of his window in horror as a polar bear approached one of his huskies, its shoulders low in a hunting stance. The husky responded with a gesture of play and the bear shifted and responded playfully. Dr. Stewart Brown comments on this sight, discussing the importance of play and how vital it is for learning, surviving and adapting to a changing environment and world (Brown, 2016). This resonates strongly with Winnicott's thoughts around the qualities of playing. Play is not seen as something purely for entertainment or for childhood, but something that is essential in its many forms throughout our lives.

We have found that when working as art psychotherapists, play is key for finding ways to communicate complex feelings and experiences. The need to think creatively and respond to our clients' 'themness' playfully as they work on their own images and ideas becomes essential for change and growth. Winnicott saw potential for play to be a therapeutic tool and a way of

communicating through many means including art. One key example of this is his use of the 'squiggle game' (Winnicott, 1971b) where one draws a squiggle for the observer to respond to by making it into a shape, object or being with their own marks resulting in a visual conversation which can be thought about together, thus bringing feelings and inarticulate experiences spontaneously into conversations.

When we discussed the squiggle game we found that we had used it often in our practices with children, young people and adults, finding it especially important when clients are feeling inhibited and struggling to re-find a sense of creativity and play. The squiggle game can allow for tender sharing and playful relating. With young people and adults we have found that it can be the start of a blossoming sense of creativity and seems to re-align something that has felt lost or dampened down. When working with adults experiencing mental health difficulties, its playfulness can 'get people started' when faced with the anxieties of a blank page. Winnicott thought play happened in a transitional space where 'me' and 'not me' can exist together in creative ways, as opposed to the compliance seen in more 'false self' functioning (Winnicott, 1960).

In his book 'Playing and Reality' Winnicott also sets out his theory of transitional objects and phenomena (Winnicott, 1971). He observed babies moving from thumb and finger sucking to holding or mouthing the edge of a cloth or soft toy, which then often developed into an attachment to a particular toy or blanket. He saw the baby as investing emotionally in an inanimate object which, from the babies point of view, is neither completely from within or without: it contains the stuff of the baby's internal world invested in it, yet it exists concretely in external reality - the first 'not me' possession. The transitional object can be seen as an early symbol of a part object; the breast, which Winnicott reminds us really stands for the technique of mothering, as well as an actual breast.

There are many examples of transitional objects culturally, for example Linus' blanket in Schulz's Peanuts and in stories about toys being alive like Winnie the Pooh and Toy Story. Artist Grayson Perry has immortalised his own teddy

bear called Alan Measles, touring a shrine to Alan around the country on a customized motorbike, which he named 'The Ten Days of Alan' (Perry, 2010).

Winnicott goes on to say he is staking a claim for an intermediary area ('me' and 'not me'), which he also called the 'third area' and a 'potential space'. This place is somewhere between a merged subjective state where the infant is omnipotently in control, and an awareness of separateness, difference and external reality. It is in this place that an infant gets a sense of themselves and where symbolic thinking develops. It is a place for play, illusion and gradual disillusionment. Winnicott thought that transitional phenomena eventually dissipate over the whole intermediate area between a person's subjective inner reality, and an objective external world of reality, developing into the 'location of cultural experience' including, for example enjoyment of art. Winnicott thought the task of reality acceptance is never completed, he writes 'no human is ever free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality' (Winnicott, 1971 p.18) and this is where play fulfills its essential task.

In order for the process of separation and disillusionment to happen there needs to be a 'good enough' emotional climate provided by the mother. Winnicott thought that a mother needed to be 'good enough', not perfect. He suggests after being in a state of heightened maternal preoccupation when the baby is first born, the mother becomes gradually and naturally slightly less preoccupied with her infant. In her normal everyday failings to attend to the infant she actually lets the baby experience frustration, difference and an awareness of separation necessary for growth. In fact Winnicott thought a too perfect mother would impede a baby's growth, as baby would remain in a state of merged omnipotence.

We have briefly summarised some of Winnicott's theories that connect to those referenced in our group's collection of visual and written responses, which we now invite you to explore below.

**Responses by the Winnicott Wednesdays Art Psychotherapist Artist Collective**

**Deba Anna Salim**



Figure 1. Saudade. 2014.

As an art therapist working with pre-school children I often think about Winnicott's theory about separation and the potential space:

'The baby's confidence in the mother's reliability, and therefore in that of other people and things, makes possible a separating-out of the not-me from the me. At the same time, however, it can be said that separation is avoided by the filling in of the potential space with creative playing, with the use of symbols, and with all that eventually adds up to a cultural life.' (Winnicott, 1971, p.109)

In the video still (fig. 1), the child and caregiver are involved in a seemingly playful game of the child being thrown into the air and caught repeatedly and the fleeting thrill it appears to engender. However, in order for this game to be fun, the child needs to feel secure and safe enough in the relationship, and the caregiver must be attuned enough to read the child's signals of pleasure and knowing when is enough.

### **Sasha Price**

'Artists are people driven by the tension between the desire to communicate and the desire to hide.' (Winnicott, 1963, p.186).

This quote resonates with the thoughts I have had about my recent work. I have been using photography to generate imagery; there is a feeling of security in the idea that the content already exists and I am simply tasked with framing it. I wonder if, by avoiding mark-making with a more direct approach, I am fooling myself that I am safe from being known. But always, there I am. Present in reflections, imprints, and impressions, and in watching myself run away.



Figure 2. There I am, running away. 2017.

**Abi Rawlins**



Figure 3. Are You Sitting Comfortably? 2017.

Working to develop therapeutic alliances with people living inside forensic mental health services, I turn to Winnicott's concept of the 'Good Enough Mother'. I reflect on his work as I enter landscapes of devastation and

volatility, within which I strive to nurture spaces where acts of tenderness might be expressed and acknowledged. Winnicott describes the supportive environment created by a therapist as a form of 'holding'. We can liken this concept to the nurturing environment created by an attentive and 'good enough' primary caregiver, within which an infant is held. In this environment a sense of trust, security and playfulness may develop.

I created this image whilst reflecting on the ways in which Winnicott's work helps me to think about early infant experiences and the risks we take when we allow ourselves to play, to be exposed and to be vulnerable with another. Will we be held? Could we be dropped? And can we be thrown away? When working with aggression, Winnicott inspires me to look beyond the veneer of hostility and hold in mind the historical context in which offending behaviours may arise. In doing so, rage and violence can sometimes be seen as despair's bodyguards and a different, more empathic conversation can begin.

**Steph Bedford**

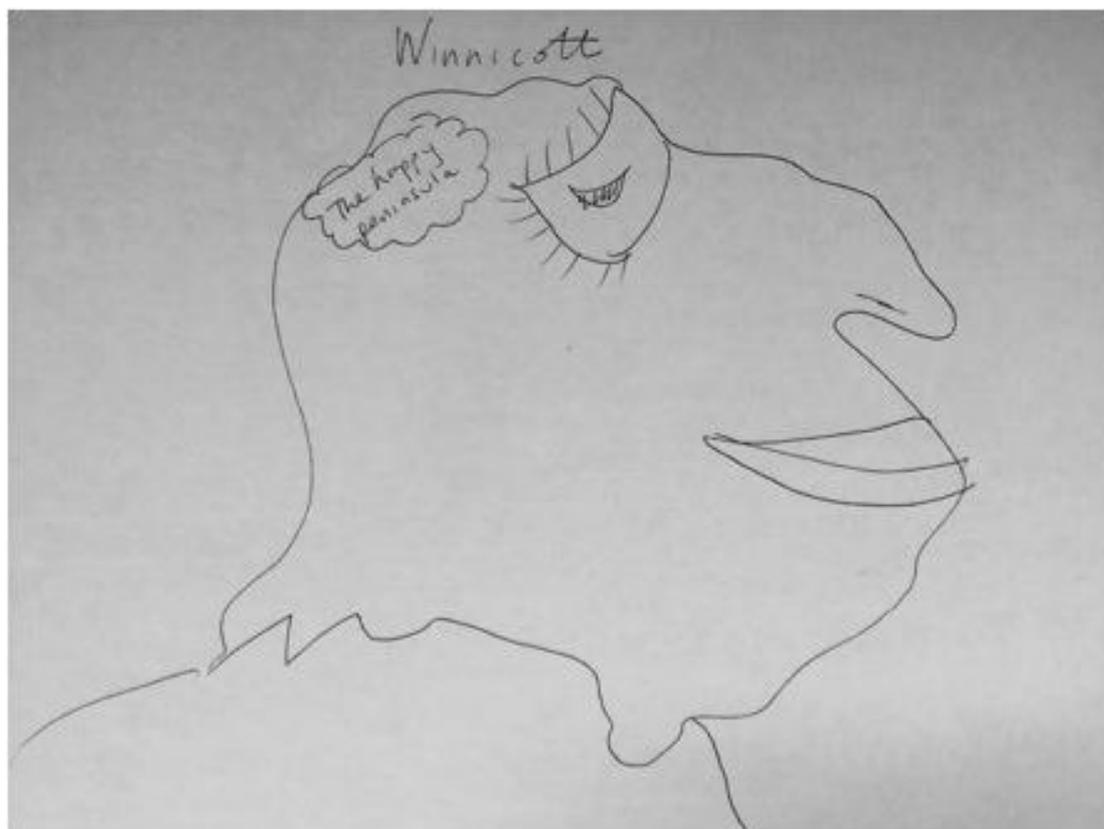


Figure 4. Peninsula. 2017.

Play is a natural 'language' of learning and communication for children. As an art psychotherapist working with children and families, suggesting Winnicott's squiggle game often encourages connection and engagement in sessions that makes the relationship playful and interactive. Introducing the squiggle game allows for expression and insight, which may hitherto be unknown or unconscious. In this way shadow aspects of the self may be made visible, deepening the meaning within the therapeutic encounter.

A doodle or squiggle seems to free the mind or bring a sense of flow. It is spontaneous and accessible and fun. This image started as a squiggle and the drawing then became, for me, about my sense of personal and professional belonging: it refers both to Liverpool – the peninsula references its geographical location – and the people who populate my mental landscapes. Making this drawing also brought up some anxieties hidden between the lines, in particular, my concern at the news of nuclear tensions

between the US and North Korea (another peninsula – the Korean Peninsula). These socio-political ‘themes’ often play on my mind – the destructiveness and creativity inherent in humanity and acted out on a world stage.

### **Tracy Downing**



Figure 5. Untitled. 2017.

The work and writing of Winnicott and my involvement in Winnicott Wednesdays play an important part in my development as an art therapist and artist. Being an artist for me is in essence allowing myself to play, create,

and explore in an increasingly disinhibited way. This enables me to understand and negotiate my relationship with people, places and things. Increasingly the physicality of mark making plays an important part in my work, as do objects remembered, owned and/or visually represented.

Art making helps me to connect with my past and present and addresses the sparse maternal mirroring and attachment that I experienced as a child. As a mother of four my journey has involved the challenges of learning that which I did not experience in becoming a 'good enough Mother'. This drawing 'inside outside' was made on large paper on the floor, the image drawn around me and large enough to contain me, was made in the presence of another or others. The making was performative including the domestic act of sweeping to clear away the excess charcoal dust and clean the surrounding area. The image is evocative of the womb, the desire to be mothered in mothering. My work as an art therapist and systemic practitioner within child and adolescent mental health services informs the artwork I make and is often concerned with the exploration of family relationships and attachment. The projects I am involved in with Winnicott Wednesdays both express and inform my understanding of art, therapy and communication.

**Helen Omand**



Figure 6. You/Me. 2017.

Winnicott's thinking on transitional phenomena often comes to mind as a therapist, artist and mother. His ideas about transitional objects have given particular meaning to a baby blanket that was handed down to me by my mother. It is a soft, hand knitted blanket with intricate stitching and I recently used it to wrap my baby in when she was first born, when she was sleeping or feeding. As Winnicott has described, I watched her try to pull a little bit of the blanket into her mouth as she was feeding or sucking her thumb, or hold the edge of it in her fingers.

The significance of the blanket prompted me to use it in an artwork and I have been experimenting with projecting a video image from my baby monitor onto the blanket. The image was recorded at bedtime: here we struggle with the ongoing everyday anxieties of separation when it is time for her to go to sleep; the moment of transition from arms to cot, joined to separate. The image produced has a ghost like quality that suggests absence, also conveyed by photography; a moment that has been captured in time but is now lost.

**Katy Heywood**



Figure 7. My Right Breast. 2015.

This image came into being after the birth of my daughter. I had always planned to breastfeed, however was unaware of the pressures and strong opinions had by professionals and new mothers about what was the 'right' thing to do. When thinking about Winnicott's ideas, I realised that they are present not only within my work but also in my day to day life and relationship with my daughter, especially regarding his concepts of a 'good enough mother' and 'transitional object'.

**Lucy Gibson**



Figure 8. Mother's day card. 2017.

As a therapist and having just become a mother I am thinking a lot about Winnicott's holding environment to be a 'good enough mother' to my baby. This mother's day card plays with the idea of an idealized mother.

**Beth Hoyes**



Figure 9. Wolf Music. 2017.

I think Winnicott's idea of the mirror role of mother and family is one of the most significant aspects of being an art psychotherapist and artist for me, enabling a sense of being truly seen and a deep feeling of acceptance. The artwork can act as a mirror and grasp something, reflecting it back more fully

than words. In my work with children, mirroring is present not just in seeing but also in shared experiences, repeated words, sounds and movements. There is a nonverbal visceral sense to this experience, which for me resonates with the music of wolves when they howl together, echoing each other. When one wolf howls, others instantly want to join in, making me think of a mother, father or family responding to their infant's noises with sing-song echoes. The howl is heard and reflected back from other wolves in the outside world confirming existence – their own sound returned to them with a new quality after having traveled through another. In this image two wolves howl side by side, fur to fur, caught in the moment of making music together.

### Lily Hsu



Figure 10. Elephant Walking Through Mountain Valley, Slowly but Steady. 2014.

This drawing was a visual response to my work with children who have learning disabilities. The idea of transitional space plays an important part in my understanding of how children process the complication of the outer world and inner conflict. Animals often appear as powerful metaphors in children's art works (Case, 2005). They were able to express difficult feelings through play, art and storytelling. I always had this feeling that the therapy room becomes the stage of my client's inner space, they allow me in and invite me to witness what has been going on for them through the language of the unconscious.

I feel very grateful that I am able to accompany my clients to go through their journey. When I thought about these children I worked with, I had this image in my head — a wounded elephant walking through mountain valley, slowly but steady.

## **Conclusion**

On gathering the responses, we were moved by the images and texts arriving in our inbox. As a group we are always oscillating between our art psychotherapist and artist identities. Winnicott's writing about artists came up in the quote, 'artists are people driven by the tension between the desire to communicate and the desire to hide'. He continues: 'it is a joy to be hidden, and disaster not to be found' (Winnicott, 1963, p.186). One thing that struck us as we gathered the responses for this article were our connections and attachments as a group: each artwork and statement felt familiar and reflected the unique individual who made it, whilst feeling the loss of the missing pieces of those who were unable to contribute or who are far away. We wondered if, as a group, we are continually finding each other and perhaps sometimes allowing each other to hide when needed.

The responses often seem to reflect the intimacy that comes through Winnicott's writing with his personal accounts and sensitivity to his clients' experiences. The thoughtful yet pragmatic way he approached raw and difficult emotional life experiences, like the task of separation, or maternal ambivalence, resonate with the group differently, as individuals at different life

stages. The collection of responses shows a wide range of ideas and personal associations, showing how Winnicott's thinking and work has permeated our understanding on many levels, not only as art psychotherapists but also as people.

Reflecting on this article as a group, we realised how Winnicott's thinking has enabled us to hold onto our struggles with our latest project, 'A:Void', a planned group exhibition. This project uses as its starting point Matthew Crawford's book, 'The World Beyond Your Head: How to Flourish in an Age of Distraction' (Crawford, 2015). In it, Crawford postulates that modern society and the Cult of Individualism is compromising our ability to really participate in a meaningful and creative way with the world around us. He suggests that our modern ways of engaging with and connecting to the world belies a more insidious disengagement and disconnection from ourselves and each other.

As part of the process of preparing the exhibition, we seem hell-bent on avoiding 'the void'. As we attempt to contemplate why this might be so, a plethora of Winnicottian theories come to mind: potential space, the threat of separation, the capacity to be alone and more. It has prompted us to think about the reasons for coming together as a group in the first place: to feel connected in a real sense. As we reflected on what is needed for negotiating the space between self and other, Winnicott's ideas naturally surfaced. We described Winnicott's work as an 'anchor' within this developing project which has aptly been difficult to grasp and hold onto.

Whilst thinking about our latest project and our development as art psychotherapists and artists we are reminded how Winnicott's theories and ideas have traveled with us; from our training roots to our current artwork and practice and into our plans for future work and exhibitions, generating on-going discussions and debates. We have enjoyed responding to the publication of the Collected Works of Winnicott and the gathering of this group response has reminded us of the creativity and play at our core.

**Winnicott Wednesdays** are Tanya Andrew, Steph Bedford, Tracey Downing, Lucy Gibson, Sarah Hall, Katy Heywood, Beth Hoyes, Lily Hsu, Helen Omand, Sasha Price, Abi Rawlins, Deba Anna Salim.

For more information on Winnicott Wednesdays or to see our upcoming workshops and exhibitions please see:

<http://winnicottwednesdays.weebly.com/>

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