

## The Hut Me – Skin as Transitional Space

*Brigitte Rota*

### **Abstract:**

This was a keynote address delivered at the International Integrative Psychotherapy Association Conference in Vichy, France. Focus was on individual sessions and art therapy with play as a way to create a space for creation and emerging of Self.

**Key Words:** Play, Art therapy, Involvement, Integrative Psychotherapy

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Laeticia is a 43 year old woman, whom I have been seeing for the past four years both in individual sessions and art therapy workshops. She complains about her pain to be : « *I hurt to be, I would like it to work within me, feel myself be* » she says. She is tiny and very skinny, with green eyes all terrified, tight, frowning. She seems alone inside and speaks about social phobia. I am touched by what Laeticia lets me know about her story, marked by the presence of a grandmother who is living at home « *to the cold and freezing contact that reminds of death* » and with whom Laeticia slept from eight months until she was three years old. A grandmother that « *phagocyted her* » she says. Her story is marked by failings and negligence from her mother, whom she describes as passive and intrusive, a depressed and violent father who raises children with belt strokes. She is the eldest of 3 kids and in this Spanish family she fights against seclusion and suffocation.

Laeticia is an educator for young children. Regularly she is moved by very small children with whom she works at the hospital. Taking care of these children distresses her. She is sensitive to the lack of mothering enfolding, emotionally absent mothers. Through these small children, she talks about herself, her story, particularly about a child that she will name « *the mercury child* », a child who takes on the form that one gives him/her and reminds me of a false self organization. I will learn, almost by chance, that Laeticia is called Joséphine by a number of people ... another, a copy of self - a social Joséphine.

I observe her summoning up her energy at the cognitive level. She describes herself as very intellectual « *words keep me warm* ». She talks to

herself, all alone, both does questions and answers, associates and loses herself in verbal twist and turns. At the level of affects, she seems emotionally numb; I can however detect her fear. At the body level, she wriggles from pain, she talks about a muscular armour and regularly complains of lumbagos « *all body joints are really painful* » she says, evocation of the painful bonds of an insecure attachment. She describes her body as « *a porous material, with holes, with no colour, with blurred outlines* »

Body holes allow her to breathe and she feels herself sink, flowing out. The muscular armour is like an envelope that prevents the flowing out, the leaking through the pierced body. She experiences her body, « the body », like an oddity, fragmented. « I miss myself within me ». She struggles to keep this ignored body silent, criticized, kept away. Her vital necessities are put in quarantine. The holes speak of an empty space, empty of self, of the other, of harmonized and sensitive connection. They are traces of failings. « The image of the body is an unconscious memory of the whole relational experience » says Françoise DOLTO, *French psychoanalyst*, the living synthesis of our emotional experiences. At the level of fantasies, Laetitia describes reading like an envelope « it surrounds me ». Words, heroes inhabit a world of silence. She cannot stand short stories, but loves 13 volumes... « it lasts longer, it holds, in a constant, permanent and stable way. I find the envelope again whenever I choose it ». Stable and secure envelope with motherly and mothering characteristics, by default of a stable and permanent person, harmonized to her relational needs.

Through visits to museums, Laetitia will talk to me about this fantasizing, (what Winnicott names dissociation), in a face to face with some statues, sculptures, paintings with which she entertains true conversations where she awakens emotionally. She feels « wrapped in kindness, compassion » by faces and chests representing buddhas who bring life inside of her. « It's like an encounter, that allows to feel life, brings life ». She can stay and contemplate a painting from Yves Klein for two hours (*French painter known for his blue « monochromes* »). Laetitia cries, laughs, talks with the painting.

She finds a minimum of contact within this schizoid compromise, that answers a need for stimulation and relation, to fight against isolation, without the risk of a relationship that she experiences as dangerous, risk of fusion/confusion/loss of feeling of self. There is less risk in welcoming the compassionate kindness of statues with a heart of stone than in exposing herself to « the manipulation of others. I do not believe in human kindness ». She is torn between the need and the fear « objects help me to take care of myself ». Books, figures, masks to which she brings life, save her. Heroes wrap her in attention and kindness. To become alive in this fantasized intersubjective space, a secret life is allowed for the true Self. I can measure what Laetitia is missing and how she managed to survive the cumulative negligence in her life by developing a dissociation between cognition and psychosomatic existence. *The focus of the therapeutic process is at the level of Body/Affects to give substance, that is by revitalizing it.* As for myself I learn patience, reserve, sufficient distance to offer Laetitia my presence - alive, touched, moved, vibrating. I can feel her

fear, which by the way makes her angry « to be legible », that means in danger, in insecurity and sad that I can feel it. I measure how much juxtaposition pain is present, at every crossroad, at every attempt to harmonization to her relational needs, to her affects.

**Just be here.** Permanent, constant, alive. I would cry in supervision session to unburden my heart of flesh. In my countertransference, I know the pain of the devitalized body, of a Me – strainer skin, with reference to the work of Didier ANZIEU (*French psychoanalyst*) who describes this like the internalization of faulty holding and handling.

I use and refer to my countertransference to maintain a distance, harmonizing to Laetitia's trauma and fear... to avoid the too near, too sensitive, too close ... that are cause for anxiety and contact interruptions within her and with her.

When in a session she experiences her painful body « the body hurts », she conjures up the image of a piece of furniture designed by an Italian, the couch of the Dona , to talk about her need. This couch she describes « red, welcoming, mothering, which invites to rest » and that I don't have in store!

She brings me to feel, to think her relational need that she cannot express directly. I will create this space for her – in my way – with red cloths and blankets that I have in my office. She settles down and laughs at my « extravagance! You're funny ». I offer her cloth that she will take home « I have been looking for one in this colour for so long ». This cloth assembles, gathers and enfolds, transitional object between inside and outside, space of reunion with self in between sessions.

Between sessions, I initiate contact, by sending her text messages. I bring her back blue stones, Yves Klein fashion, from my trips. The heart of stone becomes flesh and little by little Laetitia gains weight.

**To be here.** Within contact, her pains slowly diminish and disappear. She gets close to her wounds and lets me come close. Little by little she lets me put my hands on the painful parts of her body, empty parts, cold, traces of failings and endured violence. Within my contact I do trace and retrace the outline of her body, to stimulate the awareness of a unified and continuous body self.

Her voids fill up in my presence. We build the story, her story. We assemble the pieces of the scattered story, of a fragmented Self, through the amorous relationship Laetitia currently experiences with a man. The outline of a man, here and not here - a man from her past; they had a loving relationship twenty years ago. The negligence in the relationship causes « *waves of shock in the body* » - physical sensations, without age, without language, shakings, terrors of being abandoned, betrayal, tears without consolation. Through validation and normalization, we revisit the story of this present, that talks of the past « *my old tragedy, I find it back* »

When I ask her how I can help her, what she needs, what I can do for her, with her ... she spontaneously answers « **a hut** ». Bingo! she does not believe it, but I am a hut pro! First we build what she calls a « *psychological hut* ». A hut in images and intentions, like we were drawing its plan. My trips down town become a treasure hunt. My eyes search for things to collect for the hut.

When I express to her the joy of my findings – a great cardboard box, nice format, good quality and new – or of my disappointment – it rains, cardboard will be all soaked! – I measure the impact that my collecting has on Laetitia. My actions touch her. When I find a « goose that laid the golden eggs », I send her a picture of the cardboard treasure with a text message. This process in between session, gives power to the therapeutic process in the satisfaction of an essential relational need: you exist for me, by ensuring permanence of the bond, without cuts or hatches.



My collecting material brings constancy between sessions « good mood constancy » she says. Something of outside builds a space inside: my desire, my ideas provide a sufficient security envelope that allows for a new re-elaboration of attachment. She needs my vitality, my vitalized support to feel another alive, engaged, desiring, to experience herself being alive. We build the hut that becomes a transitional area, a space of relationship that sets in motion Laetitia's capacity to play, as Winnicott says to revive the pleasure of playing in an intersubjective space, that opens up the pleasure of « I ».

She comes to the sessions with reproductions of Japanese paintings calendars, wallpapers - she gets involved in the creation process. We build the walls, the external envelope, that sets the boundaries between outside and inside. We paste, we tape, for the structure to become a reliable and enfolding "**Me-Skin**". We paint the walls, defining the interface between outside and inside. Protective fence of which I am the guardian.

In the creative process, I accompany her to dare using colors, to paint with her left hand, eyes covered, doing with her, to help her keep at bay the internal critic and to implement something unknown to the Self : her freedom to be and to be in relation.

Laetitia relates that her body becomes less painful, less hatched, less empty of Self. Less empty of the other. Bringing together our combined desires gives substance, mobilizes and remobilizes Laetitia's life force; she moves, laughs, cries, lets herself be moved. Her body awakens in the liveliness of my desire. There is a parallel between building the hut as a transitional space and the restoration of Laetitia's body perception. Her body becomes whole, linked, relieved. Her painful spots, that correspond to the points of holding of the baby (at the cervical and lower back levels), disappear while creating the hut - soothing time that lasts for a while after sessions and precedes them.

The relational process reenergizes the body in an intersubjective sharing around an object, the hut, which is a common creation that soothes the internal chaos. **The hut Me-skin**, is at the same time an envelope and a communication place. The Me-skin ensures an individuation function of Self and brings to it a feeling of being a unique human being. Another attachment experience can now be experienced in relationship and in being safe. There are now experiences that are registered in the body by imprinting other traces, other memories. In our common achievements, we contemplate our work with joy. We interact on each other's painting, we are proud and happy.

There is an inside, an outside, doors and openings through which we communicate, through its symbolic membranes. The true Self comes to life "It is only by being creative that the individual discovers the Self". (Winnicott 1971, *Playing and Reality*, p.54). In the night that followed our last session, Laetitia had a dream: I am a beautiful Japanese women who runs naked in the rain. I feel free and happy. I do not yet feel the rain on her skin". This comment indicates the path we still have to go together.

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