KOMOTION International

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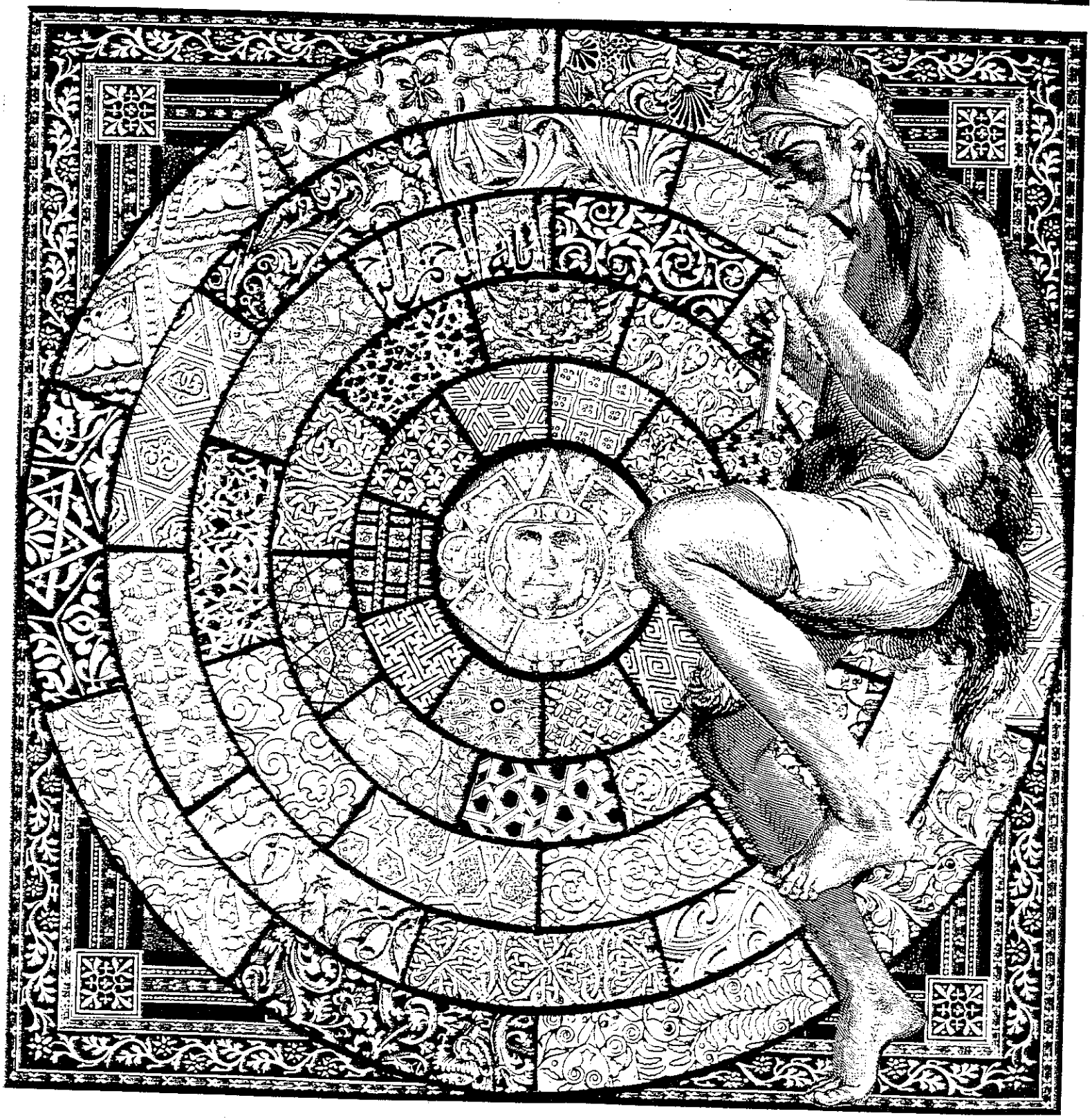

Collage by Johann Humyn Being

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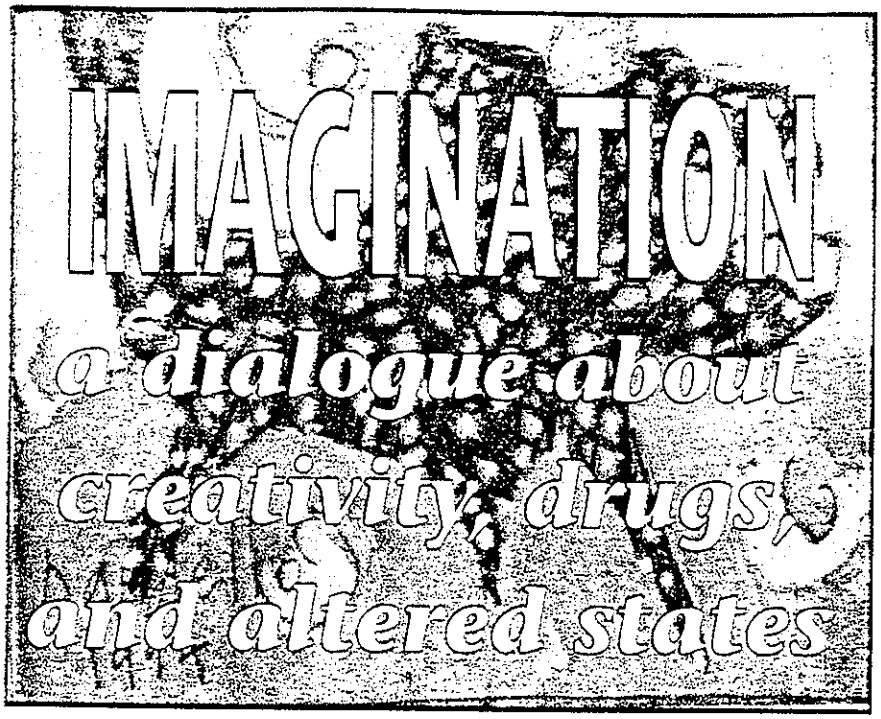


LAST TIME MAT CALLAHAN ASKED ME to write a piece for Komotion, I wrote about the fact that the literature on creativity focuses almost exclusively on individuals, but hardly ever addresses the group or collaborative work of bands, theater, films, friends, mentors, etc. — what I've been calling social creativity. It also largely fails to address another important aspect of my — and a lot of other people's — experience, namely the role of altered states and drugs in creativity, so at Mat's suggestion I'll go into it here.

In the spirit of social creativity, I've approached this project through a dialogue with Carrie Nardello, an artist whose work I very much admire. Carrie has contributed the art which surrounds these words, and what follows is based on our discussions as she was creating these paintings. Perhaps not surprisingly, what she told me about herself expressed very clearly the findings of psychologists who have studied creative individuals.

There is a long history of drug use among artists, from Coleridge's opium to the Grateful Dead, from Baudelaire's Haschischin Club to Acid Jazz ("Perhaps I did dine poorly," Baudelaire wrote of his experience with hashish, "yet I am a god"). The quest for altered states, visions, images, and sounds, is a call to inspiration, a way to open up to the world and to ourselves. The word inspiration comes from the Latin *inspirare* or to inhale — not to be taken *too* literally, I hope — but rather as a metaphor for taking in *life*. Typical of artists, and creative individuals in general, is this quest to explore, know, and express their lives and their experience.

Artists — and just about everybody else, for that matter — commonly explore altered states because they provide a different way of seeing the world — they break mental 'sets' and allow us see the world anew. Our everyday consciousness can become very dulled by routine, and particularly living in large cities we can become insensitive to much of what is around us — we have to shut out some of the noise, the pain, the babble. Aldous Huxley felt that the brain was a 'reducing valve', filtering out supposedly nonessential information. But who decides what is essential? Part of the creative process involves switching to a state of consciousness where we can regain our sensitivity. We can also get into altered states to become desensitized, to forget our sorrow — to anesthetize ourselves. Getting drunk when we're depressed is a typical example. In this piece, we'll focus exclusively on altered states that are used not to block out experience, but to increase and expand it.

Creativity researcher Frank Barron writes that consciousness-expanding drugs can have the following effects: *An intensification of esthetic sensibility*, with colors becoming more vivid; experiences of synesthesia where colors are 'heard', sounds are 'seen'; beauty and ugliness become more important. *Unusual associational patterns become more frequent*: in other words, the familiar becomes strange, and the strange can become familiar. We see the world differently, and make unusual associations and connections, which are typical of the creative process. *Intuition in relation to other people is increased*, so we can seemingly 'see through' people, although Barron warns that "sober judgment" should be "the final arbiter of the intuitive leap." *Higher purposes and the motivation to make one's life philosophically meaningful become very important*: many artists who have taken LSD, or have experienced other profoundly consciousness-expanding altered states, have reported that the experience made them become more serious about their work, and gave it greater depth.

All these effects can 'go both ways,' and Aldous Huxley's book on mescaline is titled *Heaven and Hell* for good reason. At the suggestion of a friend, the French philosopher and novelist Jean Paul Sartre had a mescaline experience in 1936, while writing his book *L'Imagination*. The title of his next book was *Nausea*, which probably gives you an idea of Sartre's trip. (He had the experience of being harassed by crustaceans in a train — the train was 'real', the crustaceans weren't — and never ate lobster or crab again.) It was all there — intense esthetic experience (ugly crustaceans), unusual associations (life as nausea), intuitions of others ("hell is other people," he was to write later in the cheerily titled *No Exit*), and the motivation to make life philosophically meaningful displayed in his plays, novels, and philosophical works.

Harvard psychologist Timothy Leary, on the other hand, had a much more positive experience when, at Frank Barron's suggestion, he first tried mushrooms: "Nile palaces, Hindu temples, Babylonian boudoirs, Bedouin pleasure tents, gem flashery, woven silk gowns breathing color, mosaics flaming with Muzo emeralds, Burma rubies, Ceylon sapphires. Here came those jeweled serpents, those Moorish reptiles sliding, coiling,

tumbling down the drain in the middle of my retina... The journey lasted a little over four hours. Like almost everyone who has had the veil drawn, I came back a changed man." Leary sensibly argued that mental *set* and physical *setting* were crucial to experiences of altered states. In other words, you have to be in the right frame of mind in the right place, because as you become more sensitive, you're going to be experiencing an amplification of both what's in your head and what's in your surroundings.

While Sartre got stuck in his nausea, Leary, stuck in solitary confinement, went on to develop a theory of "many selves," a theme that's been taken up by many other researchers since. Despite our 'common sense' assumption that there is one 'I', one 'me', research is increasingly showing that we are made up of many different 'I's' — we're very different people confronting a highway patrolman, our lover, our dad, or our boss, just as we may be different people after a few pints of beer or during an intense LSD or Ecstasy experience. Exploring altered states is, in a way, an exploration of this multiplicity of selves, all the different worlds we inhabit and create. It requires a great sensitivity, an increased awareness of the enormous complexity and multilayered nature of our experience.

Going Out of Your Mind to Come to Your Senses

Creativity involves a certain degree of 'falling apart' in order to get it together again, and this means remaining open and to some extent vulnerable. Altered states can put us in a place where we're very open, receptive, and vulnerable, and many of us find the uncertainty this creates frightening and disturbing, particularly if it means letting go for a while of our notions of who we are and what is 'really' real. The problem is that the refusal to be open, this psychic conservatism, closes off any possibility for creativity and change.

Altered states come in many varieties. Dreams and daydreams are altered states, as are experiences of deep sorrow, joy, fasting, strobe lights, dancing, and sleeplessness (sound familiar?). Carrie and I tried a brief experiment with hypnosis as part of our exploration of altered states. Hypnosis allowed Carrie to 'go inside', shut out external interference to some degree, and generate images spontaneously. In a nutshell, the process was a form of hypnotic visualization, where I asked Carrie to imagine a new painting. This loosely structured daydream allowed her to get to places in her imagination where she can get to normally anyway, but not necessarily 'on demand', and she did visualize a painting. The images are still with her, and she feels she might incorporate some of them in her work. All this to suggest that our creativity and inspiration can be tapped through altered states in numerous different ways, not necessarily all illegal or serendipitous.

One of the most common altered states leading to creativity is love — the experience of being shaken to one's foundation by somebody else's presence. The troubadours of the middle ages used to make a discipline

out of falling in love with unattainable (usually married) women, and the exquisite longing that would build up over periods of years was the source of inspiration for thousands of poems. Research shows that the self 'expands' in love, that we experience ourselves and the world more fully — there's an 'opening up' that occurs. When asked to write a description of themselves, people in love tend to write much lengthier pieces than people who aren't, which suggests that the more we experience, the more we need to express it somehow. In fact, the research also suggests that *not* being able to express ourselves, and 'bottling up' strong emotions can lead to all sorts of psychological problems, and even to violence and self-destructiveness.

'External' triggers, like someone we fall in love with, or someone who makes us angry, are not the only way to experience and express more. We can also focus on what's already there. Really paying attention to daydreams (and not just daydreams about winning the lotto or shooting the landlord) can make us aware of thoughts and images that normally get lost in the ongoing mental chatter. For Carrie, as for so many artists, there is a real need to explore these subtle mental and emotional states: "I have to live out the fullest experiences. There's so much more depth there, so much information. Skipping along the surface isn't enough. I've always been like that, always delving and diving and reading between the lines — perhaps too much, because sometimes there really are just surfaces . . ."

Marijuana works in a very interesting way in this process of opening up, because it can make us more aware of fleeting thoughts, impressions, and ideas, and therefore more aware of the richness of our own consciousness. It's often been remarked by stoned laypersons — and there is evidence for this in the admittedly scanty research literature — that marijuana makes the world seem richer, colors brighter and music more complex. An intensification of attention occurs, because marijuana slows down our subjective sense of time, and we literally experience more.

When we're rushing somewhere in a hurry, we hardly notice the world around us. The technical term for this is *negative hallucination* — not seeing things that are actually there. (So we're really hallucinating all the time . . .) When we slow down with marijuana, meditation, or other methods, we seem to appreciate things more intensely. There seems to be more depth to our perception. As time speeds up, and we feel we have 'less' of it, experience becomes more two-dimensional. When we slow it down, space opens up and experience becomes more 3D.

Shamans are said to use often elaborate rituals to journey into altered states (a variety of trances, induced by dancing, fasting, self-hypnosis, drugs, and other means). In these states, they access information not normally available to them. We create rituals to get in — and out — of mental and emotional states: we dress up for work or for a party, businessmen have their martinis to unwind, and others have a hit of marijuana to tune out the mental chatter of work and worry. When

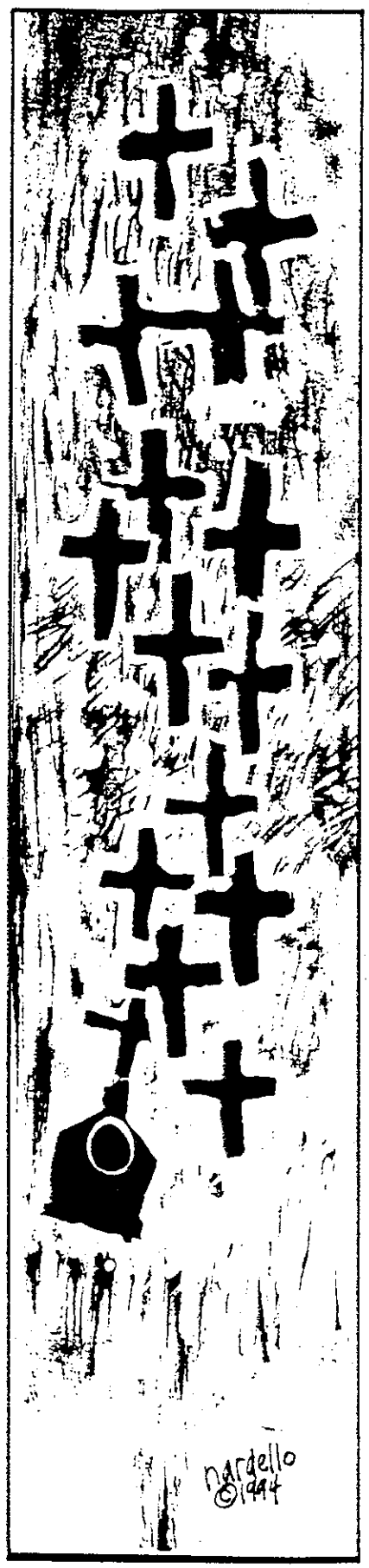
Carrie goes to her studio, she has a certain mental set and a physical setting which prepare her to work. She has "a morning ritual, a painting ritual, ways of getting mentally prepped — putting on my work clothes, making coffee," and these are all ways in which she can consciously begin to shift her attention. Carrie tries to "keep the continuity by getting back to the place I was when the piece I'm working on began to have a voice."

As we change our consciousness, our world changes too. The need for a quiet space to work in, and the interruptions created by everyday matters (like having a night gig) make it important for Carrie to be able to switch consciousness and move into a work space. "I can change spaces really quickly, put on different hats," she says. Sometimes you have to be a businessperson, be flexible, talk to other people who don't share your background, and other times you have a few hours in the studio, or get ready for a performance, in which case you have to put aside worries about the bills or personal problems.

Different states are useful at different times. As a saxophone player, I find marijuana may be enjoyable for improvisations and solos, but I definitely don't want to have short-term memory loss when I'm in a recording studio, the clock is ticking, and I have a few minutes to remember intricate horn lines. There's also a difference between the state we might want to be in for getting ideas, and the state we get into to put them down on paper, canvas, or tape. Sometimes it's not appropriate to put things down right away, when we're still in the middle of an experience, whether it's strong feelings or an altered state of a different kind. Just looking and listening is enough, and there's also the risk of rushing and losing the experience, switching into a 'productive' mode when we should stay in a 'receptive' mode. When we finally need to choose the notes we want to play, the brushstrokes we make, we move from *divergence* (a multiplicity of ideas) to *convergence* (choosing out of all the possibilities). This is sometimes a different state, one where our training and critical judgment come into play, the "sober judgment" Barron spoke of. Our set and setting, as Leary suggested, are crucial in the creative process as well.

"Being in different states of consciousness is helpful," Carrie told me, "because sometimes you're exploring and inspired, you're finding the painting, being daring and not caring what's being said. You're having fun in the moment, but then you look at what you've done the next day and you wonder, What have I done? So it's good to go out there, but you have to be able to bring it all back and really concentrate, you have to bring it together and make it work as a piece. It's easy to get *into* a piece but hard to get *out*. You have to edit yourself, make decisions, and move along, even if it means letting go of things you like, but don't necessarily work in the piece. That's when your education comes in, and you have to use your judgment."

The importance of "sober judgment" cannot be overestimated, particularly in the case of drug-induced altered states. The philosopher and



psychologist William James describes the case of a man who had a mystical insight (in this case, the secret of the universe, no less) on laughing gas (nitrous oxide). The man made an intense effort to write down his insight, and when he sobered up, rushed to see what it was. The insight turned out to be "a smell of petroleum prevails throughout."

Many artists remain stuck in places of great sadness, which can then turn into clinical depression. They can become habituated to these places, and see them as the only world there is, forsaking the reality of other interpretations of the world. One of the all too well known dangers associated with altered states is addiction. Depressive states of great or even overwhelming feeling can, like drug-induced highs, become addictive, because we think it is only in those places that we have the inspiration to work. A narrowing of attention takes place as we become more and more accustomed to one way of seeing the world, and end up 'frozen' in one particular self. Here we find ourselves unable to operate unless we change our consciousness, and being straight becomes a problem. We lose all fluidity between different states, get into an either/or mode, and want to get high because being straight means being low.

The Flow

Carrie finds marijuana an extremely useful way of getting to what psychologists have called the 'flow' state, where we become profoundly absorbed in our task and operate to the best of our abilities. "The state of mind I'm in when I'm working is always a trance-like state," Carrie told me, "and marijuana helps to get me there quicker. Then the work takes me other places, not necessarily what I set out to do originally. You have to listen to the work and follow it through. This is what a lot of artists and painters strive for, it's the journey with little magical moments, these little magical mistakes. You don't know where they came from, whether it's from you or someone or something else, but they just happen. That's the high of painting, finding that freshness. Then are moments that are just as magical, but you can't capture them, like trying to photograph a sunset. The outcome isn't the same as the experience. It's the process that counts, the means and not the end." And the process of creation is *itself a* high, as Carrie says, it's an altered state in and of itself.

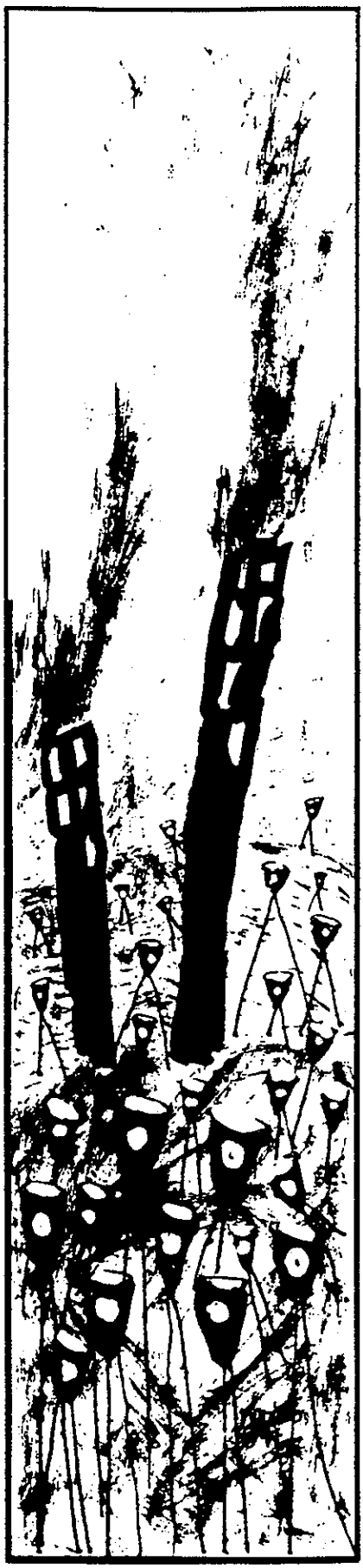
Carrie eloquently describes the flow state: "When things are going well, it's like I'm on fire," she told me. (Interestingly, the Sanskrit root for Shaman is the word *s'ram*, 'to heat oneself'.) "My consciousness shifts," she said, and "everything becomes more visual, I think in colors, and the imagery I'm working with resonates in my mind. When I leave the studio, the images of the paintings stay with me, and I see them just by closing my eyes. Light and shadow become more evident, and seeing is like looking through the viewfinder of a camera. Even emotions start to take on color associations."

John Coltrane's long solos in his later years were almost like a meditation to find that place of flow, where even at very high tempos there just seems to be more time to play each note. The whole thing about good

funk and finding the right groove is also an attempt to get to that place where everything 'locks in', and the interaction creates a form of 'collective altered state of consciousness.' Musicians can become very aware of the flow state when they play, that place where the music seems to play itself.

The same flow state occurs at times when we write, and characters and ideas take on a life of their own. The metaphor of the journey is appropriate, and reminds us that one of the best ways of getting over writer's block, or a lack of inspiration in general, is by just starting to write rather than assuming we must know everything we're going to do before we do it. Creativity is not a monologue but a dialogue, and, like a conversation, we don't necessarily know where it's going to take us.

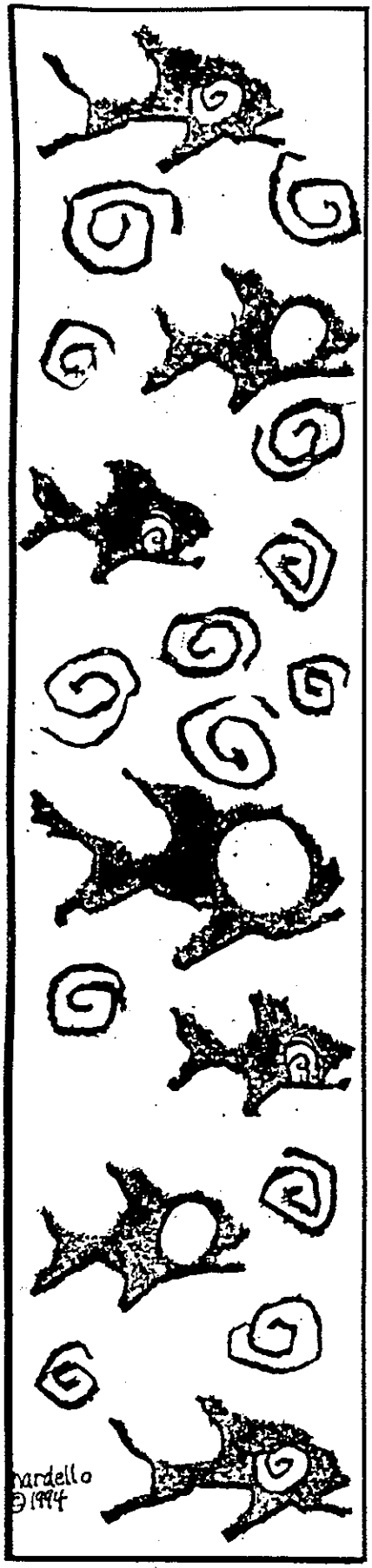
While tired postmodernist claims of the death of the author may be highly exaggerated, what seems true is that we might need to relinquish the idea of the author — whether novelist, painter, or musician — necessarily *consciously* knowing once and for all what the content of a work is all about. In Carrie's case, "a lot of it is subconscious, there are elements from so many different parts of me, my ancestors, my parents, my friends, and my experiences in general. Sometimes I look back on a piece and wonder, Why did I paint that?" Art creates worlds of meaning, an exteriorization of our experience showing us things we might consciously not be aware of. As we 'objectify' our experience by painting or other means, we can then explore what we've done and learn from it, perhaps in the same way that looking over an old diary might give us a glimpse into unformed ideas, feelings and thoughts that were yet to blossom.



Dreams of the Imagination

Freud called dreams 'the royal road to the unconscious,' and they're still the most commonly experienced altered state around. Recently Carrie described to me a significant dream she had about a year ago. Her experience can illustrate some of the dynamics of altered states. The dream consisted of a black square, a very dark and different world she felt she could climb into — and come back to in her imagination after the dream was over. "I felt the most intense sadness and sorrow I had ever experienced. It's a beautiful place, and I wanted to be there because it's a place where I can go to be sad. I see this square as a place I carry inside me. When I voluntarily fall or slip into it now," she told me, "I can still experience those feelings, although not as intensely."

Carrie's dream raises a lot of interesting questions. We might ask why she would even *want* to be in this place in her soul where she can feel intensely sad. Most people spend their whole lives avoiding sadness, and use drugs or other means to get *away* from 'negative emotions'. This going into experience is part of what psychologist Rollo May called "the courage to create." We can also choose to remain in contact with people who make us feel strong emotions, rather than backing out. There is a lot we can learn from being around someone who makes us angry or sad, or



a love unrequited, precisely because the emotional turmoil this creates, the raw emotion, gives us an opportunity to learn about ourselves as our psyche throws us one curveball after the other. And perhaps if we truly love, we love for many reasons, and must find many different ways of showing our love.

Creative individuals avoid repression, and want to explore the world fully, even if it means facing a sometimes bittersweet pain — they seek out complexity, the unknown. But for Carrie the black square is not an end in itself. In her words, it is a "secret passage to the unconscious, a pocket of creative inspiration." The exploration of these places is a way to work through them, by bringing them out in painting, in music, or even through dialogue with friends. "Once I'm there I have to get out of it, and expressing it is the only way. The way to get it out is to paint it, to work it through. It keeps me sane. Sometimes I need to discuss things, and other times, particularly with strong emotions, I work them through myself."

Carrie described a recent painting made while she was angry. Coincidentally, the painting was commissioned for my book *Unusual Associates*, a series of essays in honor of Frank Barron. "I had done a lot of background reading on the subject," she told me, "but frankly I was having trouble finding an image. I was at a friend's house who happened to be the roommate of a person I was not getting along with. He wasn't there at the time, but there was enough of him around to make me very angry. My friend, who is also an artist, had paper and inks on the kitchen table and I naturally gravitated there and in a fit of rage created the piece." In this case, her education as a painter, and the reading she had done on the subject matter all converged along with the fact that "I had to deal with the anger and the hurt. I was feeling very upset and needed to do something with that feeling. I needed to express myself, instead of just suppressing it. And yet the piece turned out to be full of love. Although the process was therapeutic to some extent, it didn't make me see everything nicely 'in perspective' — I was still angry after it," she laughed. But for a while, "the anger was dissipated," and perhaps this new perspective was a step towards integrating the experience, allowing her to step outside it and look at it differently. "I remember the incident, and the piece becomes like a little diary. I know what went on behind the piece, I know the story it documents." As for the actual process, Carrie pointed out that "If I'm painting while I'm angry, I notice my hand strokes and my choices of colors are different. All strong emotions are a source of really deep inspiration for me, and I may use the same red if I'm angry or if I'm in love, but the energy and the attitude behind it is different." Significantly, she points out that "I don't want to directly mimic the feeling or the story, I don't go to the canvas and just paint anger, or the images in my dreams, which seems so literal and devoid of creative process."

The whole journey Carrie describes can be seen as a process of creative self-discovery, an exploration of complexity, gathering a wealth of information — feelings, images, and thoughts — and then the integra-

tion into a new order in the form of a painting — and perhaps a new self. It seems that part of the creative process for Carrie involves integrating the experience, rather than just blurting it out, and letting her whole self speak as she paints, rather than just that part of her which is angry or caught up in emotion, or the image in a dream.

The effect of this process of exploration is undoubtedly 'therapeutic', and, in Carrie's case, painting becomes a way of entering into a dialogue with herself and her world, a way to explore deep emotions, ideas, and relationships. Carrie's 'black square' is really a remarkable gift (from her unconscious?), allowing her to move in and out of this state with some degree of ease rather than being stuck there, or completely closed off from it. It's a way of "mental travel," as she puts it, where she can experience the 'depth of feeling' Frank Barron found crucial to the creative process of great artists. Carrie's work has this great depth of feeling combined with a powerful energy. Perhaps this energy is partly a product of her ability to dive into her experiences and emotions, or the black square, and come out the other end.

Part of the creative process is, at some level, the interpretive creation of the world we live in, and the creation of the self and of our relationships. Perhaps part of the energy in some people arises, as Carrie said, in a faith in the *process* itself, in the means as opposed to the end, and the realization that any end is only a temporary stepping stone in an ongoing process. It's all grist for the mill, a process of profoundly personal healing for the artist that is also universal in the sense that it can heal or at least resonate in a positive way with those who experience it. In this way, the energy becomes a kind of *power*. But Carrie is quick to point out that's it's not power *over* other people, as she puts it, but a power *to*, "the power to *give* energy, to take whatever we've got and make something positive of it, and give it back."

One of the remarkable things about the creative process is the way it can show us people who have 'eaten bitter', as the Chinese say, and yet do not *become* bitter, or force the bitterness on others, but come back with a positive energy that is all the more remarkable and admirable precisely *because* of their life experiences. Perhaps the deeper our experience, the more of it we have to give, and we can draw on the energy that our experiences give us and *transform* it within us in a way that can inspire and inform others. And what we choose to do with our experiences, 'altered' or otherwise, and with our energy, should we decide to cultivate it, is ultimately up to us.

— Alfonso Montuori