Transformative scaffolding: painting to grieve

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Abstract: In contemporary philosophy of mind, *scaffolding* designates the various ways in which our cognitions and affects are enabled, regulated, and modified by environmental factors that range from material artifacts and other people to architectural designs and cultural practices (Clark 2008; Sterelny 2010; Colombetti and Krueger 2015; Coninx and Stephan 2021). In this article, I expand the scope of scaffolding theory by applying it to a previously unexamined type of phenomenon: *existential transformations*. In short, these are processes where an individual's basic sense of reality undergoes profound and relatively long-lasting alterations. My main claim is that the use of external scaffolding can play a crucial role in such periods of extensive existential change. To unpack this claim, I proceed as follows. First, based on phenomenological theorization on the structure of experience in general (Heidegger 1927; Køster and Fernandez 2023), and then on the experience of grieving in particular (Køster 2022; Ratcliffe 2023; Higgins 2024), I specify what I mean by an existential transformation and the shifts in one's sense of reality that it entails. I then draw on psychoanalytical thinking (Winnicott 1971; Bollas 2018) to introduce the notion of *transformative scaffolds*, i.e., environmental resources that can in various ways be used to enable, support, and regulate a marked shift from one experiential world into another. To exemplify this kind of scaffolded transformation, I return to the topic of grief and discuss how the practice of painting can beneficially shape post-bereavement mourning. To conclude, I recap my main theses and consider how they might inform future research on the scaffolded mind.

Keywords: transformative scaffolding, grieving, painting

1. *Introduction*

When we converse with friends to untangle our love lives, play video games for excitement, and use smartphones to manage our everyday lives, we rely on our surroundings to shape the way we think and feel. In contemporary philosophy of mind, this type of environmental support is known as *scaffolding* – a term that captures the various ways in which our cognitions and affects are enabled, regulated, and modified by external factors that range from material artifacts and other people to architectural designs and cultural practices (Clark 2008; Sterelny 2010; Colombetti and Krueger 2015; Coninx and

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Stephan 2021). By challenging the assumption that mental phenomena can be sufficiently explained by intra-bodily factors alone, the concept of scaffolding promotes a *situated* view of the mind (see, e.g., Griffiths and Scarantino 2009; Robbins and Aydede 2009; Stephan and Walter 2020). In this approach, the explanatory emphasis is on environmentally embedded interactions between embodied agents and their natural, technological, and social surroundings. Advocates of scaffolding theory thus seek to elaborate on the diverse ways in which mental states and processes depend on and are shaped by the 'situations' where they occur.

Over the past decade, the scaffolded mind has been anatomized in increasingly fine detail (see, e.g., Sterelny 2010; Sutton 2016; Varga 2019; Saarinen 2020b; Coninx and Stephan 2021; Newen and Fabry 2023). These efforts have helped to specify what scaffolding interactions consist of and how they differ from one another. Affect and cognition can, for instance, be scaffolded by different kinds of *resources* (e.g., material, social, and symbolic), on various *timescales* (e.g., episodic, ontogenetic, phylogenetic), and with varying degrees of conscious *awareness* and personal *intent* on the part of those affected. Another key factor is the nature of the *causal relation* between the agent(s) and the scaffold. In some cases, the resource functions more or less unidirectionally to influence the target mental state, like when a couple listens to 'their song' to re-ignite a feeling of togetherness; in other cases, the resource becomes a more integrated part of the process, e.g., when an improvising musician plays music that affects the way she feels, which in turn influences what she plays next, and so on in a truly bi-directional fashion (Krueger and Szanto 2016). To be sure, this is not an exhaustive list of the factors and dimensions that can be included in analyses of the scaffolded mind. It does, however, make clear that scaffolding interactions can vary in several respects, and that within this multivariable framework and for specific research purposes, one may choose to concentrate on a select set of relevant factors.

That said, in this article I will not break down a particular scaffolding situation in light of its key factors or dimensions. Instead, my main aim is to expand the scope of scaffolding theory itself by applying it to a previously unexamined type of phenomenon: *existential transformations*. Simply put, these are processes where an individual's basic sense of reality undergoes significant alterations. My main argument is that the use of external scaffolding can play a crucial – and sometimes even necessary – role in such periods of profound existential change. To unpack and defend this claim, I will proceed as follows. First, based on phenomenological theorization on the structure of experience in general, and then on the experience of grieving in particular, I specify what I mean by an existential transformation and the shifts in one's sense of reality

that it entails. I then draw on psychoanalytical thinking to introduce the notion of *transformative scaffolds*, i.e., environmental resources that can in various ways be used to enable, support, and regulate a marked shift from one experiential world into another. To exemplify this kind of scaffolded transformation, I return to the topic of grief and discuss how the practice of painting can beneficially direct the course of post-bereavement mourning. To conclude, I recap my main theses and consider how they might inform future research on the scaffolded mind.

2. *Existential transformations and grieving*

For specifically phenomenological purposes, the term 'transformation' can be used to designate the process of changing from one *experiential* state or condition to another. More often than not, such changes are minor, ordinary, and barely noticeable, like shifting from inattentive boredom to a state of mild curiosity. But experiential transformations can also be much more profound, especially when they involve alterations in one's overall sense of what is real and how one relates to that reality. These changes may of course take place to varying degrees, on different timescales, and in numerous circumstances, e.g., through sudden illness, religious conversion, a long-time commitment to a certain lifestyle, or – as I will shortly discuss in more detail – the death of a loved one. But whatever their differences, such changes can rightly be classified as *existential*, as they all entail shifting from one all-encompassing sense of being to another. Yet this description is still rather vague. What, more precisely, do such existential transformations consist in? What *changes* in them?

For over a century, phenomenological philosophy has elaborated on the *invariant structures* of experience (or Heideggerian "*existentials*" for short), which include, but are not limited to, intentionality, selfhood, embodiment, temporality, spatiality, and affectivity (Heidegger 1927; for a helpful overview, see Fernandez 2017; Køster and Fernandez 2023). In short, existentials are the "categorial characteristics of human existence" according to which all experiencing is necessarily organized (Fernandez 2017: 3552) – and in that capacity amount to what might be called the ontological architecture of our being in the world. Moreover, each existential accommodates a broad variety of particular "*modes*" or ways of being. Køster and Fernandez (2023: 153) nicely illustrate the difference between existentials and modes via Heidegger's discussion of affectivity: whereas the existential category of affective situatedness (*Befindlichkeit*) picks out the basic ontological necessity of always being attuned to the world through some mood or the other, the actual moods that we *do* inhabit in different situations – whether it be anxiety, joy, or something else – are

the variable modes, or ways of being, that belong to the stated category. The same distinction between general categories and their particular modes applies across the board. As Køster and Fernandez (153) continue, "we can describe the general structure of temporality; but we can also describe the particular temporal modes of whiling away the time or of eager anticipation. Alternatively, we can describe the general structure of body image; but we can also describe the body image of a particular person or class of people" – and so on with all existentials.

With the conceptual tools of 'existentials' and 'modes' in hand, we can now sharpen the definition of existential transformations. A transformation is properly existential when (a) it involves a *change in the mode(s)* of one or more existential category, such as intentionality, affectivity, selfhood, or temporality. In addition, this change must (b) have a *profound* impact on one's basic sense of reality and (c) also be relatively *long-lasting*. To be sure, profundity and longevity are approximate quantifiers, so there is no clear cut-off point between existential and non-existential transformations. Nor am I interested in establishing any such demarcation. Still, I maintain that there is a sufficiently feasible way to assess both the persistence of change and the extent of its effects on one's sense of reality. This can be done by *comparing* the pre-change and post-change experiential state or condition of the individual in question.

Consider, for instance, three persons who have a similar – and let's say conventional – sense of temporality: for each, time flows naturally, has a certain order and duration, and organizes experience clearly according to a past, present, and future. Now suppose that, with reference to this shared sense, the first individual experiences a shift from "whiling away their time" to "eager anticipation", the second one ingests psylocibin and feels as if time has "slowed down" or "lost its meaning" altogether, while the third becomes severely depressed and ends up feeling irreversibly "stuck in the present" and completely "out of sync" with shared time. All things considered, the difference between the first individual's prior and latter states is minimal: their basic sense of time remains fully intact, as they have just momentarily shifted from one ordinary temporal mode to another. Simply put, there is no thoroughgoing change in their sense of reality. The second person clearly exhibits a much more radical alteration in how they experience time, and hence also reality, and yet their world returns back to normal as soon as the effects of the hallucinogenic wear off. The third person's situation is, however, markedly different from those of the other two. Their experience of the flow, duration, and succession of time has not only undergone a radical shift vis-à-vis their prior sense, but this mode of experiencing has also become relatively permanent. The altered condition is therefore expected to persist in determining how the depressed person experi-

ences themselves, others, and the world – an existential transformation, if ever there was one.

Like falling seriously ill, the death of a loved one – a partner, friend, parent, child – can radically and lastingly destabilize one's sense of being. Allan Køster (2022a) characterizes bereavement as a distinctively *world-distancing* state: it withdraws its subject from the world and encloses them in a "grief bubble" from which everything appears remote and detached from oneself. Køster sheds more light on the phenomenology of this state through the four existentials of spatiality, temporality, sense perception, and intercorporeality. In that order, world-distancing can be summarized (non-exhaustively) to consist in (1) a lack of closeness or connection with one's surroundings, (2) a disturbing feeling of desynchronization with, and separation from, the flow of socially organized time, (3) an impoverishment of perception, e.g., finding that things look less clear or sound more muted than before, and (4) an inhibition of one's embodied interactions with other people (Køster 2022a: 90-95). To borrow Matthew Ratcliffe's (2023) expression, such disruptions constitute a *grief world* where one is compelled to balance, often precariously, between a loss of life structure and the establishment of a new structure. If this balance is skewed towards loss, he adds, there is a heightened sense of *indeterminacy*: "a sense of lacking something that more usually shapes and guides one's experiences, thoughts, and activities" (79). All in all, then, grieving involves numerous experiential shifts and tensions between pre- and post-bereavement worlds, and in the middle of this uncertainty it is highly challenging for the mourning individual to achieve a more stable, loss-integrating sense of reality. Yet there is little choice but to face the demands of this existentially weighty situation.

Before moving on, it is worth emphasizing that bereavement does not merely require restructuring one's relationship to a world that is factually 'still there' after the loved one's death. In reality, as the so-called *continuing bonds* view of bereavement so convincingly underlines, grieving also involves reorganizing one's relationship to the deceased, who obviously is no longer there in the flesh (Klass, Silverman and Nickman 1996; Attig 2011). From this perspective, bereaved individuals are not expected to simply 'let go' or 'move on' from their lost loved ones. On the contrary, their absence is often kept alive in some way or another. As Ratcliffe (2023: 133) encapsulates it, "letting go of an experiential world that depended on the deceased need not amount to losing all sense of ongoing connection with the deceased". Grieving is therefore an open-ended and dynamic process of relearning one's relationship with both the world *and* the deceased. I will return to this and other experiential features of bereavement – and its existential impact – in section 4, where I discuss the ways in which painting can support the transition from a 'grief bubble'

to a state where the loss has become more adaptively incorporated into one's sense of reality. But first I will flesh out the idea of transformative scaffolds as resources for reorganizing one's overall standing in the world.

3. *Transformative scaffolds*

In order to properly explain (1) what transformative scaffolds are and what they do, (2) how we come to use such scaffolds in the first place, and (3) why we need them throughout our lives, I will rely extensively on D. W. Winnicott's (1896–1971) theorization on early childhood experience. I discuss this developmental period at some length precisely because it enables in-depth elaboration of the key features and existential significance of transformative scaffolds. This will in turn serve to frame my subsequent discussion of adulthood scaffolding and existential transformation vis-à-vis grief and painting.

To begin, one of the most momentous existential transformations – and one which everyone must go through if they are to secure a viable sense of reality at all – occurs in the earliest stages of life. It is also during this critical period that we slowly learn to scaffold our experiencing more and more *autonomously*. I submit that these two developments, i.e., the emergence of a stable grasp of reality and the ability to scaffold one's experiential life, are inextricably bound together: one cannot develop without the other. The basic premise here is that infantile experiencing is regularly accentuated by feelings of *undifferentiation*, which means that the neonate is still unable to (consistently and clearly) distinguish between its environment and itself (for discussion, see, e.g., Winnicott 1971; Stern 1985; Pine 2004; Taipale 2014). If that is indeed so, how is the necessary transition to a world of independently existing things initiated and accomplished?

According to Winnicott (1971), everything begins with the caretaking environment and its patterns of provision. Initially, post-partum caregiving is geared towards fulfilling the baby's needs as promptly and precisely as possible. In these circumstances, Winnicott argues, the baby is likely to experience the caregiving object (viz., that which meets its needs) as a *part of itself*, and under its *own control*: when in hunger, the bottle or breast simply appears at the right time to feed it, and when in distress, the caregiver materializes at once to provide comfort. Such near-perfect adaptation to the baby's needs should not, however, be carried on for too long. If the baby is to develop a sense of internal (subjective) and external (objective) reality, its experiences of undifferentiation and omnipotent control must be curtailed. Simply put, the baby has to be subjected to gradual *disillusionment*. Only then can it come to experience objects as something that exist independently in their own right, and not just

as "magically" manipulable parts of an undifferentiated world (10-12; 47-48). In short, through gradual shifts in provision, the baby's caregivers instigate and support its attainment of a more differentiated sense of inner and outer reality, and of self and other.

Another critical step in this regard occurs between four to twelve months, when infants increasingly "weave other-than-me objects into the personal pattern" (Winnicott, 1971: 3). This means that non-caregiver objects begin to figure more prominently in carving out a new experiential world for the baby. Winnicott introduces a specific term of art – "transitional phenomena" – to elaborate on the essential features of this transformation (1-15). The stated phenomena are 'transitional' precisely because they signal and support the baby's *passage* from undifferentiation towards an "intermediate area" where subjective reality and shared objective reality co-emerge and intermingle (2). Often at this stage a specific rag, soft toy, or other similar object will become especially comforting for the baby. These "transitional objects", as Winnicott accordingly calls them, serve to soothe and relax the baby, and defend it against anxiety by standing in for the nurturers' care in their absence (4). Again, here the term 'transitional' denotes the *function* of these objects: they enable *advancement* from a rudimentary psychological reality to a more developed one.

The baby's adoption of a personal transitional object – its first "not-me possession" (Winnicott, 1971: 4) – also marks a major turning point in its ability to *self-regulate* its feelings through environmental engagement. As such, it constitutes an incipient form of self-initiated and self-sustained affective scaffolding. To be sure, infants' feelings are also scaffolded *prior* to this pivotal development. Indeed, the main affective function of primary dyadic relationships is to enable and support feelings which the infant cannot experience or regulate on its own, including feelings of being soothed and satisfied (Colombetti and Krueger 2015; Taipale 2016). And here already – just like in its use of transitional objects – the baby is not a passive recipient of one-way affective modulation but plays an active role in shaping how the scaffolding interaction unfolds. Be that as it may, the point I wish to emphasize is that the baby's newfound access to transitional objects considerably *expands its possibilities* for active environmental engagement, and thus diversifies the network of (potential) scaffolding resources at its use. It sets in motion a decisive shift from a limited, caregiver-centered world towards multiple environments in which an increasing number of other resources can be employed to modify personal experience.

From this point of view, it is unsurprising that the earliest transitional objects have a limited lifespan. For a while, a rag or teddy may well be an indispensable affective scaffold for the baby. But eventually, and inevitably, it loses its psychic importance, at which point it is "not so much forgotten as relegated

to limbo" (Winnicott 1971: 5). At the same time, the child's proactive use of objects continues to spread more broadly into the world of shared culture. As Winnicott puts it, the domain of transitional phenomena steadily "widens out into that of play, and of artistic creativity and appreciation, and of religious feeling", among others (5). A lot more could certainly be said about how, from the Winnicottian viewpoint, our capacities to play, create, and participate in culture stem from our earliest environmental interactions. For present purposes, however, it suffices to reiterate that *our very first (quasi-)autonomous use of scaffolds serves a transitional, and also deeply existential, function*.

Building on Winnicott's concept of transitional objects, Christopher Bollas (2018) has designated as *transformational objects* those objects that have the power to induce significant changes in our experiential lives. And, like Winnicott, he considers the caregiver to be primary in a long line of such objects. The crux of the matter here is that the baby's earliest experience of the caregiver is of a *process* that satisfies its needs and, in doing so, transforms its self-experience. Since the caregiver is not yet disclosed to the baby as an independent object but rather as a "recurrent experience of being", early dyadic interaction involves a "kind of existential, as opposed to representational, knowing" (89-90). Gradually, the child learns to use objects other than its caregivers to serve similar self-transformative functions – the prime example again being transitional objects like rags or soft toys. Later in life, transformational objects are found more widely in, e.g., the worlds of religion, political ideology, and – as I will shortly demonstrate – art and artmaking. Essentially, then, we are developmentally 'primed' and existentially driven to pursue scaffolding interactions with self-transforming and self-enhancing objects.

In this connection it is worth noting that the existential concerns that propel the early passage from undifferentiation to differentiation never really cease to occupy us. Indeed, in maturity, we are regularly pressed to reconcile our feelings, wishes, and desires with an unconforming and frustrating reality. At the same time, our self-other boundaries remain porous and flexible, and we therefore continue to weave together 'the me' and 'the not-me' – albeit in more sophisticated and nuanced ways. As Winnicott sums it up, "no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality", nor is the "task of reality-acceptance [ever] completed" (1971: 13). This means that the problem of achieving a dynamic equilibrium between subjective and objective realities is not limited to the transitional phenomena of childhood but extends into the twilight of our years (see also Rose 1980: 112-129). If such perpetual processing exists, and I believe it does, it will inevitably be scaffolded in everyday life by a multiplicity of environmental resources.

However, the more restricted sense in which I propose to examine transformative scaffolds does not concern one's continuous negotiations with the world so much as relatively discrete periods where one's overall sense of reality undergoes significant alterations. Hence, it may be helpful to spell out the following conceptual distinctions. First, processes of experiential transformation can be either *actively scaffolded* by the agent or they can occur on their own *without any significant use* of environmental resources. An example of the former would be listening to music to enable the transition from a lethargic state to a more energetic one, whereas growing increasingly bored of an academic presentation would be an example of the latter. Second, experiential transformations can be *existential* or *non-existential*. Neither of the two aforementioned transformations can be regarded as existential since they do not incorporate profound and relatively long-lasting changes in one's basic sense of reality. Bereavement, on the other hand, clearly involves an existential transformation: one is compelled by circumstance to inhabit a 'grief world' that is constituted by radical disruptions in affectivity, selfhood, temporality, and so on. However, and this is key, bereavement is a *non-scaffolded* existential transformation insofar as it *just happens* to the bereaved individual (see Markovic, 2023, for an informative study of grief as an *unchosen* transformative experience). This finally brings us to what is at stake in my analysis. Finding one's way *out* of a 'grief world' – that is, actively rebuilding one's life anew – is an existential transformation where scaffolding can play a crucial role. My focus, then, is on the ways in which such transformations can be scaffolded by the bereaved individual by means of *active employment* of environmental resources. Painting is just one of the myriad processes that can fulfill this function, but it can, as I will now argue, be an especially effective one at that.

4. *Painting to grieve*

In one of his letters, Winnicott suggests that painting can be a means for the artist to *feel real*, and sometimes even the *only* means to feel so. He writes:

> I am implying that actual experiencing does not stem directly either from the individual's psychic reality nor from the individual's external relationships. This sounds rather startling but you can perhaps get my meaning if you think of a Van Gogh experiencing, that is to say, *feeling real*, when painting one of his pictures, but *feeling unreal* in his relationships with external reality and in his private withdrawn inner life. I think that this idea badly needs working out but it is this sort of thing that I am trying to convey..." (Rodman 1987: 124, my italics.)

This somewhat tentative observation betrays a vital idea. By painting, painters can *create for themselves* objects that enable them to deal with fundamental

existential concerns, to experience the enriching interweavement of subjective and objective realities, and ultimately, to transform aspects of their basic sense of reality.[1] On this view, the practice of painting constitutes a special, existentially significant object-relationship that scaffolds experience – and experiential transformation – in ways that might be difficult (if not impossible) for the painter to achieve by any other means (see also Saarinen, 2020a).

The proposed existentially oriented account of painting is readily applicable to grieving, too, which means that painting can enable the bereaved individual to transition from a 'grief world' of disruption, uncertainty, and detachment to one of renewed stability and meaningful connection. A similar view has recently been proposed by Kathleen Higgins (2024), who draws briefly on Winnicottian theorization (and especially Lear 2022) to suggest that grieving and aesthetic-creative activity both unfold in a space of *imaginative play* – that is, in the intermediate area of experience where one does not need to make sharp distinctions between self and other or inner and external reality. As highlighted earlier, grief involves an interplay between absences and presences that disrupts one's previously taken-for-granted certainties about the world. In the midst of this confusing state, imaginative and creative activities can help to forge new connections, address both the living and the dead, and answer questions about a world that has gone confusingly awry (Higgins 2024: 77). It is thus within this framework that I ask: In what ways can painting – as a distinctive kind of imaginative and creative practice – contribute to grieving people's efforts to restructure (a) their sense of themselves and (b) their way of relating to the world and other people while (c) sustaining and renewing their relationships with the deceased (see Higgins 2024: 184)?[2]

My answer will come in parts, or to be more precise, in terms of specific existentials and their modal alterations and reconfigurations. I will illustrate each experiential category of existential change with quotes and observations from painters who have dealt with their own bereavement by painting. It is important to keep two things in mind while considering what I have to say.

[1] For present purposes, I use the terms 'painter' and 'artist' liberally to designate anyone who paints or makes art, regardless of whether or not they are a professional.

[2] Despite following the main thrust of Higgins' theorization, my account diverges and expands on hers in several notable ways. First, although Higgins discusses a wide variety of grief-supporting aesthetic practices, in the case of artworks she focuses mainly on works that are *readymade*, whereas my emphasis is on *creating* such works for oneself. Second, Higgins does not analyze any particular practice in *extensive detail*, as I do with painting. One of the main reason for focusing on painting is precisely because there is plentiful theorization and testimonial evidence available on its transformative effects. Finally, Higgins does not rely substantially on either psychoanalytic, phenomenological, or 'scaffolding' theorization; thus, by combining these in original ways, my discussion provides a *novel conceptualization* of the relevant phenomena.

First, although particular existentials/modes can be delineated and scrutinized separately for conceptual-analytical purposes, in actual experience they are always necessarily bound together. More often than not, an alteration in one will be accompanied by an alteration in another. Second, my analysis is not meant to be exhaustive. Instead, I will pick out three existentials – affectivity, selfhood, and intersubjectivity – which aptly illustrate how painting can scaffold the transition from a 'grief world' to a newly structured reality.

4.1. Affectivity

In contemporary research, grief is generally considered to be an emotional pattern or process rather than a distinct emotional episode (Cholbi 2021; Ratcliffe 2023; Higgins 2024). In other words, it is a temporally extended phenomenon that can include various emotions, such as guilt, aggression, regret, and loneliness, but also love, humor, and gratitude. I adopt this view to submit that painting can scaffold grief-related affective transformation in at least three notable ways. First of all, it enables the *expression* of inchoate feelings and the *externalization* of unbearable feelings of anger, confusion, sadness, and the like. This is not only relieving but can also provide new insight into what one is going through, and can thus serve as a new basis for finding meaning. For example, when artist Gail Sibley heard about the death of her former partner, she decided to "sink into" artmaking, with the following results:

> This total immersion in the creative process was hugely therapeutic. It was as if the process offered a safe place to release the tensions of sadness and anger. It embraced me fully and gave me a conduit to express my feelings. It gave me a place to speak and externalize my grieving. (Sibley 2018)

In short, painting can provide an experiential space for the articulation and therapeutic release of one's feelings. But to add to that, it can also be an effective way to *regulate* current affective experience. Consider, for instance, how artist Hannu Lukin describes responding to the death of his wife:

> I began painting manically after Meeri died. I went through the process of grieving by painting portraits, so that I didn't have to be alone… The portraits and their exclusive focus on the face subdued my feelings of loneliness and anxiety. (Kovalainen 2019, my translation.)

Clearly, the activity of making pictures alleviated Lukin's sense of isolation and distress. To that end, his choice of subject matter appears to have been absolutely crucial: by choosing to paint *portraits* (not only of his wife but of other people too), Lukin surrounded himself with the presence of 'surrogate' others who kept his loneliness at bay. To rephrase this in more positive experiential

terms, painting furnished him with a sense of *connection* and *companionship*. A similar sentiment of valued emotion regulation can be found in the following observation from a widower seeking to recapture the joy she had lost through bereavement:

> I have to go with the living, I cannot live with the dead. You can't live with pain indefinitely, you know? It's too painful. So the art takes away pain. (Joy) is at the end of my paintbrush. (Arnold 2021: 65)

This brings us to the third and perhaps most emphatic point I want to make about affectivity. Painting not only externalizes, expresses, and regulates ongoing feeling but can also *evoke new emotions* that significantly advance one's adaptive reorientation to reality. Often, world-distancing grief can feel utterly *deadening*: as if one has lost all "vital contact with reality" (Køster 2022a: 98-100, following Minkowski 1970). There are two sides to this loss. Winnicott notes how, on the one hand, individuals can be out of touch with shared objective reality and thus become prone to delusion and hallucination, while on the other hand, they may be "so firmly anchored in objectively perceived reality that they are ill in the opposite direction of being out of touch with the subjective world and with the creative approach to fact" (1971: 66-67). I believe both possibilities show a loss of vital contact with reality – either internal or external. In the former case, one finds oneself helpless in the face of a crushing, post-bereavement world – a world that must be rigidly conformed to and accepted as it is, without any room for creative maneuvering or negotiation. In the latter case, one is instead lost in a subjective world of memories, fantasies, and wishes where the deceased is still forcefully present and significantly structures one's behavior. The common denominator between the two is that subjective and objective reality have ceased to intermingle flexibly, and one or the other has come to dominate one's experience.

Painting has the power to return the grieving individual to a space of imaginative play where the subjective and the objective can interweave again, and in this way may help to revive a sense of vital contact with reality (in either direction). A crucial part of this is that, in painting, "the deceased can be felt to be symbolically present but recognized as externally absent" (Higgins 2024: 170), which reconciles the tensions of an either/or approach to reality. But there is also another way in which painting can induce beneficent feelings of vitality. Many painters experience their artworks as lifelike objects or quasi-subjects, portraying them as 'partners in dialogue' or 'beings' that respond to their painterly gestures, propose courses of action, and sometimes even take over the entire creative effort (Saarinen 2020b). I submit that the experienced 'aliveness' of one's paintings also enables *oneself* to feel more alive and con-

nected. In this manner, the given feelings satisfy a core existential striving that has been seriously thwarted by grief, namely, the need to find and maintain meaningful and enriching contacts with the world. Considering all of the above, it is no coincidence that a recent art therapy project for widowed partners of Ukrainian soldiers has been named *Alive: True Stories of Love*. As its founder Olena Sokalska explains, "It's called 'Alive' because the girls should feel alive since they all feel lifeless right now. When you paint, you only think about that." (Arhirova, 2023).

In a grief world permeated by indeterminacy and confusion, painting can also elicit stabilizing feelings of *control* and *empowerment*. The emergence of these feelings owes largely to the fact that, for painters themselves, paintings-in-progress are not ready-made scaffolds with certain fixed features (as they will be when they are completed and available for a wider audience). Instead, painters must create these works *by* themselves and *for* themselves through an open-ended process, which also gives them a distinctive kind of control: the authority to personalize the paintings to satisfy their idiosyncratic needs, wishes, and desires. Indeed, it is arguable that Hannu Lukin painted *faces* – and not just any faces but faces of certain people, and in a particular aesthetic style – precisely because it proved effective in regulating and overcoming his current sense of isolation. How the finished works impact other people is another matter, and far less under the artist's control. Ultimately, the very achievement of *making something new* may also be an empowering experience. That is, like any other act of creativity, painting can enhance one's sense of agency, of being able to actively shape one's world to accommodate one's own needs and (existential) concerns.

In sum, painting enables the regulation of ongoing affective experience and the elicitation of feelings that can help to restabilize and restructure one's experiential world. Also, by giving visible form to grief, it facilitates reflection and brings clarity and coherence to feelings that are unstable or inchoate. I will now continue to elaborate on the latter theme, but in light of grief-induced alterations to selfhood.

4.2. Selfhood

Bereavement can have an extremely disruptive impact on one's entire sense of self. As Køster (2022b: 386) notes, "it is not uncommon for the bereaved to express that 'I feel like part of myself has died', 'I have become a stranger to myself', [and] 'I no longer know who I am or where I belong'". Simply put, grief can be profoundly *self-alienating*. Although self-alienation is often considered to result from the *presence* of an intrusive or oppressive 'otherness', I follow Køster in underlining the *loss* of an 'otherness' that is essential to a uni-

fied and vital sense of self (388). More specifically, I submit that self-alienation results from the absence of a *form-giving* other. What does this mean?

From a Winnicottian perspective, the maintenance of a coherent self can be successful only if the environment can be trusted to reflect back in personally meaningful form previously unstructured and shapeless aspects of one's experience. Without the proper environmental scaffolding, disparate elements of subjective experience cannot be organized into larger, coherent patterns, and are therefore left unavailable for self-integration and self-enrichment. In bereavement, one such form-giving and self-supporting scaffold is irretrievably lost, leaving the bereaved in a disconcerting state of isolation and self-estrangement.

But *all* is not lost. By harnessing their imaginative capacities, bereaved individuals can create for themselves *new* form-giving objects. As Winnicott has shown, there is a direct link between creativity and self-integrity, the latter of which can be encapsulated as a unitary sense of "I AM, I am alive, I am myself" (1971: 53-64). When this idea is transposed to the context of artistic creativity, we can see that (re-)forming oneself through an external medium is essential to painting, too. To put it simply, painters bring their selves into being through their creative efforts, and it is only those creations that resonate with their experiential worlds that effectively enable them to "exist and feel real" (Wright 2009: 154). This is understandable if we think of painting as a type of commerce, or a kind of give-and-take, where painters put themselves into their paintings in order to realize themselves through them (142). In sum, insofar as paintings enable their makers to externalize previously indefinite aspects of their own subjectivity in a newly cast, more coherent, and more integrated form, painting can be said to serve a *mirroring* function.

So, besides scaffolding affective experiencing in various ways (as discussed above), painting can also serve more holistically as a *self-integrating* and *self-formational* resource. Consider once again Hannu Lukin, who adds the following to his account of grieving by painting:

> I've painted myself into shape before, mentally speaking. That's exactly what happened here, I didn't have the nerve to not paint. (…) The only way I could pull myself together during the heavy work of grieving was to paint. (Kovalainen 2019, my translation.)

Under the threat of disintegration, painting seems to have given Lukin the all-important feeling of being 'held together', so much so that he had no option but to carry on doing so. By giving concrete visible form to his experience via his paintings, he quite literally painted himself *into shape*.

Sometimes the self-alienation of profound grief includes *dissociation*: a psychological mechanism that protects against overwhelming anxiety by splitting

off from conscious awareness unbearable aspects of one's condition (Bose 2005; Diseth 2005). When that happens, significant elements of experience are left unprocessed, and yet this unintegrated content persists to (unconsciously) organize one's thinking, feeling, and perceiving in various crucial ways. This is not so much a matter of repressing clearly defined mental contents from awareness but rather that certain elements of experience remain *inarticulate* to begin with – there are no verbal links to the experience, as it were. In this situation, painting can serve as a "messenger" between areas of dissociated experience and consciousness (Bose 2005). In other words, when painters externalize and symbolize split-off aspects of their experience in the visible object of the painting, they create a "witnessing presence" (Bose 2005) – an 'other' that allows them to communicate with previously ungraspable aspects of themselves.

When the world is disclosed as chaotic and distant and feelings of self-alienation take hold, painters can thus create for themselves concrete objects that can, through their mirroring function, serve for the disorganized self as an integrating and (re-)formative presence. But the influence of painting does not end at one's own boundaries, as it were. As I will next demonstrate, the concrete presence of paintings also bears upon the existential of intersubjectivity and, in particular, on the twin needs of (a) maintaining a meaningful bond with the deceased and (b) communicating one's grief to others.

4.3. Intersubjectivity

When his brother died of a drug overdose at the age of 35, Preston Zeller set out to paint one small free-form picture every day for an entire year, which eventually added up to a 365-piece mosaic that was installed on his living room wall. This ambitious project culminated in a somewhat surprising choice:

> In the very last painting, I wanted to use his ashes… like a closeup abstract of his pupil. I'm sifting through the physical remains of my brother… feeling very strange about it in general, but then also making this final sort of commemorative painting. It was very just in-the-zone, again that kind of flow state happening… it was just a very strange point to end the painting. (Zeller 2022, my transcription.)

Incorporating the physical remains of the deceased into the art object is indeed a rather unique – and some might say innovative, others macabre – way to remember them. But from a broader perspective, it is just one of many ways in which painting can help maintain or rebuild a *meaningful bond* with the deceased other. Another way to do so is illustrated by art therapist Maya Gronner Shamai, who painted a 'death mask' of her stillborn son. Recalling how she felt doing so, she writes:

> I felt as if I was touching his face again, sculpting his face with my fingers. I felt close to him; the art allowed me to feel that I was securing the contours of his image. (Metzl and Gronner Shamai 2021: 5)

Gronner Shamai's account demonstrates how painting can enable the grieving individual to retain a concrete impression of the deceased as a distinct individual ('securing the contours of his image') while also functioning as a vehicle for comporting oneself toward them ('I felt close to him'). It may be that clearly representational depictions of the departed aim to satisfy, at a deep psychological level, the need to hold on to the lost person in all their physical concreteness and detail (Metzl and Gronner Shamai 2021: 5). As such, they also serve to defend against the threat of the loved one's disintegration in the griever's own inner reality.

In addition to painting a 'death mask', Gronner Shamai gathered the sheets in which her son had died and the diapers that had been stored for him to create another, abstract painting. By making art with these particular materials, she says she managed to "feel the closest she could" to her baby (Metzl and Gronner Shamai 2021: 3). Most importantly, Gronner Shamai's collection of grief-induced paintings helped her to establish an enduring bond with her son:

> Keeping my artworks and looking at them from time to time symbolically maintained the internal connection with my baby, my child, a relationship which endures in some fashion even today alongside life that continues on. (Metzl and Gronner Shamai 2021: 3-4)

To elaborate on this topic, Gronner Shamai and her therapist colleague Einat Metzl present several penetrating observations about the ways in which painting can uphold one's bonds with the deceased. First and foremost, they suggest that artistic representation can remove the barrier between life and death by providing tangible visual evidence for one's felt connection to the lost person. In this sense, the artwork "bears living testimony" to the relationship (2021: 3). In other words, when physical co-existence is no longer possible, both the process of artmaking and the final product (the painting) can sustain the experiential essence of the valued bond. Metzl and Gronner Shamai also consider the artwork as a Winnicottian transitional object, in that it not only comforts the grieving individual but also enables them to connect and move between two worlds: an external, objective world where day-to-day reality continues on its own course and an internal, subjective world where the relationship with the deceased develops uniquely to suit the griever. In sum, by means of symbolic representation, painting enables the bereaved individual to *find a place for the dead* at the confluence of different realities (see Higgins 2024: 186) and in this way also scaffolds a broader process of existential transformation.

Of course, painting can also be a constructive way of relating to those who are *still alive* and an effective means of making one's grief more accessible to them. Higgins points out that there is often an *empathy gap* between those who grieve and those who have not experienced bereavement (2024: 138). Art and artmaking, she asserts, can help to bridge this gap by augmenting potential sympathizers' experiences with virtual ones; this expands the empathic perspectives that they can assume and thus makes the grief more intelligible (140). In other words, when an artwork provides resonance with the griever's experience, it functions as a *communicative resource* – a "vehicle for making sense of those who grieve" (140). The desire to communicate their grief is also notable in the creative work of Hannu Lukin and Gronner Shamai, both of whom have made their work public: the former in an exhibition and the latter in a journal article. Preston Zeller, in turn, has arguably taken the idea of communication up a notch. The explicitly stated aim of his project was not only to share his grief with others but also to create "a grief-positive movement" that openly embraces and disseminates the idea of grieving as a self-transformative process (Zeller 2022).

I have now discussed how painting can transform the griever's experiential world by focusing on the existentials of affectivity, selfhood, and intersubjectivity and, with respect to each, on several modal alterations relevant to grieving and artmaking. To be sure, painting can scaffold the grieving process via *other* existentials as well, including temporality and sense perception. However, it is beyond the scope of this article to develop a comprehensive analysis of these – indeed, each existential could quite readily lend itself to an independent, longer-length study. And to continue on the matter of scope: I have not endeavored to develop an account of what is *distinctive* to painting as a transformative scaffold, e.g., in relation to other artforms or creative practices. Some of the transformative mechanisms involved in painting may well be available elsewhere, while others might not be – this is also a question for another study. Here, I have discussed 'painting to grieve' solely as an illuminative example of how existential transformation can be scaffolded by the individual via active employment of environmental resources.

5. *Conclusion*

In this article, I have introduced the notion of *transformative scaffolds* to conceptualize how environmental resources can be actively used by individuals to support processes of existential transformation. I have specified these transformations as relatively profound and long-lasting modal alterations in one or more existential category, such as intentionality, affectivity, selfhood,

and temporality. By recourse to psychoanalytical theorization, I have shown how we acquire and develop our basic capacity to use transformative scaffolds and have also explained why we continue to need these scaffolds throughout our lives. With the specific case of 'painting to grieve', I have illuminated how individuals can – in times of existential upheaval – create for themselves scaffolds by means of which they can adaptively restructure their sense of self, others, and the world.

Overall, my account has extended the explanatory scope of scaffolding theory to cover an aspect of our experiential lives that has not yet been properly acknowledged in this context. Indeed, for the most part, scaffolding theory has been used to explain how environmental resources are employed (a) synchronically to support here-and-now, short-term, and relatively common cognitive operations and affective experiences or (b) diachronically to establish more durable cognitive/affective states, abilities, and dispositions. Granted, these familiar applications of scaffolding theory might also go some way towards explaining existential transformations. However, as it stands, I do not believe current theorization can quite grasp what is at stake here. First of all, it is not sufficiently geared to recognize that in this instance the target of scaffolding, i.e., what is being scaffolded, is a *progressive period of profound change* rather than a limited operational process (like solving a problem) or a short episode (like feeling relaxed), or the acquisition of a more permanent capacity (like the ability to use language) or stable disposition (like being prone to jealousy). Moreover, existing theory is not properly equipped to address the specifically *existential nature* of the suggested period of transformation. For that we need the concepts of existentials and modes, as I have argued above.

All in all, then, I believe that the proposed account of transformative scaffolding provides new and valuable tools to broaden our understanding of the ways in which environmental resources can be used to shape our experiential lives. Moreover, the relevance of this existentially oriented account is not limited only to the so-called *user/resource model* of scaffolding that I have worked with here (see Slaby 2016). Since this model only deals with cases where individual agents employ external resources *intentionally* for specific personal *benefit*, it leaves aside cases where, on the contrary, experience is *invasively* scaffolded – and possibly also undermined and exploited – from the outside by various technologies, norms, practices, and institutions (Slaby 2016: 7). A distinctly harmful form of scaffolding can be found, for instance, in social media use that ostensibly promotes feelings of belonging but is simultaneously operationalized by its owners (or some third party) to foment antagonistic and paranoid political attitudes. I submit that these invasive types of processes can also be fruitfully couched in terms of transformative scaffolding, insofar as they

deeply transform aspects of the affected individuals' basic sense of reality. In fact, adopting an existential perspective can serve to highlight the profound import of all kinds of manipulative scaffolding processes, and thus alert us to the gravity of their dangers. Transformative scaffolding can, in sum, work for better or for worse.

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