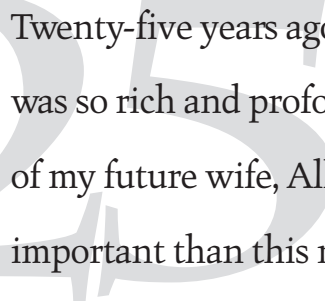


# The Creative Process and **Entheogens**

by Alex Grey adapted from *The Mission of Art*



Twenty-five years ago I took my first dose of LSD. The experience was so rich and profound, coupled as it was with the meeting of my future wife, Allyson, that there seemed nothing more important than this revelation of infinite love and unity. Being an artist, I felt that this was the only subject worthy of my time and attention. Spiritual and visionary consciousness assumed primary importance as the focal point of my life and art. My creative process was transformed by my experience with entheogens.

Due to its visionary richness, I think the entheogenic experience has great importance for fueling an artistic and cultural renaissance. By giving artists a meaningful experience and access to deeper and higher aspects of their soul, they are given a subject worth making art about. A worthy subject is an artist's most important discovery—it's the magnetic passion that burns in their work and attracts them to it, and also determines whether they will attempt to evoke what is deepest and highest in their viewers.

Oscar Janiger's studies of LSD and creativity showed that many artists felt the work done while tripping or post-tripping was more inventive and inspired work than their previous work. Keith Haring, one of the most celebrated artists of the 1980s, credited LSD with stylistic breakthroughs that brought him to his own unique work. I feel the same way about my art. This doesn't mean I recommend sacramental drug use for everyone, but I do think it should be a legal option for all.

"How can we bring the insights of the entheogenic state into our lives?" For the visionary artist this is a somewhat straightforward translation of the mystical

experience into artworks that transmit the depth of feeling and perception of the subtle inner worlds. The entheogenic state is, of course, unique to each individual. And yet there are archetypal states of being that are experienced by large numbers of psychonauts, and which can be evoked with our art. Let's look at the trajectory and potential stages of the psychedelic experience and see how it translates into works of art.

## **First Effects:**

1) In the beginning stages we notice some physical body changes. We might feel jittery or some rushes of energy through the body, possibly an opening up of the chest or head. We feel a heightened sensitivity to colors and notice wavy or slowly billowing distortions of our outer world perceptions. When we look inward, we begin to perceive dynamic geometric forms and cartoon-like figures morphing into strange and inventive shapes. The unconscious is becoming conscious. The depth of mystery and meaning that our conceptual mind keeps at bay in our ordinary perception becomes flooded with portent.

2) Our perception is open to the beautiful and in the back of our minds we

begin to feel that reality is weighty or there seems to be some kind of symbolic importance to life. The perception of beauty and meaningfulness is mingled. Rushes of bliss and laughter, releases of ecstasy. Life is lucidly interpreted in a more holistic framework. Everything is okay, even if it is out of our control.

#### **Beginning to Surrender to a Higher Power:**

3) Psychodynamic visions. Unresolved repressed emotions emerge and are faced via dramatic personally meaningful imagery. This can lead to frightening encounters with suppressed memories, and can begin to break down an individual's ego structure. This is perhaps not as important or lengthy a phase for emotionally stable and integrated individuals.

#### **Transpersonal Stages:**

4) Birth, death, and rebirth experiences. The ego/small self is frightened, crushed, overcome and reborn through intense chthonic and cathartic visions.

5) Archetypal and mythic figures. In our last trip, Allyson and I were meditating on each other's faces and began to see "everyface" of humanity wash across the face of our adored one. Allyson became every woman and every animal and for her I became all men and all animals.

6) Energy release. Kundalini movements in body, chakras opening, awareness of subtle energy systems.

7) Universal mind. Cosmic unity, voidness or emptiness as ground of being beyond polarities.

Each of these stages or structures of higher consciousness and the subtle inner worlds can be evoked in our art. The Integrative Entheogenic Vision in art would at least bring together the opposites as most every sacred art tradition has done in the past, both the dark and the light, reason and intuition, science and religion, male and female, life and death, matter and spirit.

Heinrich Klüver studied the effects of mescaline on normal subjects and he found there were certain visual and perceptual "form constants" that recur in psychedelic voyages. I think these shapes have relevance to developing our entheogenic artistic vision. The form constants are the spiral, the lattice or fretwork, and the imagery of tunnels and funnels or passageways. There is a perception of "greater dimensionality," both visual multi-dimensional and ontological dimensions of meaning. Iridescent and finely filigreed organic and complex geometric shapes evolve and dissolve, referencing both nature and sacred

architecture. Colors appear more radiant and overwhelming. Light itself takes on a palpable character. The white light is everywhere present holding everything together.

An experience of such overwhelming power can influence an artist's approach to their work. In order to bring forth her or his deepest work, an artist needs to be sensitive and courageous toward their own creative process. There are many stages in the creative process. Several scientists have attempted to outline the mysterious phases of creativity.<sup>1</sup> Below is my adaptation of their findings.

#### **The Creative Process:**

- 1) Formulation: discovery of the artist's subject or problem
- 2) Saturation: a period of intense research on the subject/problem
- 3) Incubation: letting the unconscious sift the information and develop a response
- 4) Inspiration: a flash of your own unique solution to the problem
- 5) Translation: bringing the internal solution to outer form
- 6) Integration: sharing the creative answer with the world, and getting feedback

Not all artists will recognize each phase in their work, and each phase takes its own time, widely varying from work to work. The first stage is the discovery of a problem. This is the most important question for an artist, "What is my subject?" The formulation of the problem arises from the artist's worldview and may set the stage for an entire life's work—that is, if the problem is sufficiently broad. The problem is the "well" dug to reveal the Source, the Vision, the creative matrix of questions and obsessions that drive an artist. Solving your aesthetic problem be-

comes your mission.

In an effort to illuminate the many stages of the creative process, I'd like to share a bit of the story behind my painting, *Transfiguration*. I have always been mystified by the body-mind-spirit relationship and the difficulty of making these multiple dimensions of reality visible in a work of art, but not until my LSD experiences did I want to make mystical consciousness itself the subject of my art. It took me about ten years of making art and obsessing over this subject to reach the formulation that this was one of my primary artistic problems, an important part of my vision.

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During the next stage of saturation I looked over everything I could find about the subject. It was a period of research that led me through many tracts of transpersonal psychology and the art of diverse cultures. I prepared a slide-show and lectured on the subject of “Transfiguration,” showing artistic representations of transcendental light or energy in relation to the body. At that point I didn’t know I’d be doing a painting by that name.

The incubation stage is where the vast womb of the unconscious takes over, gestating the problem. The embryonic artwork grows effortlessly at its own pace. For the *Transfiguration* painting, this phase lasted about half a year.

Then early one morning I woke from a dream. In the dream I had been painting a piece called *Transfiguration*. The painting had a simple composition, two opposing spherical curves connected by a figure. Floating above the earth sphere, a human, which was fleshly at the feet became gradually more translucent. At about groin level it “popped” into a bright hallucinogenic crystal sphere. The dream revealed a unique solution to my simmering aesthetic problem. But this illumination or inspiration phase, my “Aha!” moment provided by the dream, was extended or underscored later that week when I smoked DMT for the first time. As I inhaled the immediately active and extremely potent psychedelic, I got to experience the transfigured subject of my painting first hand. In my vision, my feet were the foundation of the material world. As I inhaled, the material density of my body seemed to dissolve and I “popped” into the bright world of living geometry and infinite spirit. I noticed strange jewel-like chakra centers within my glowing wire-frame spirit body, and spectral colors that were absent from my dream painting. I was in my future painting and was being given an experience of the state in order to better create it.

After receiving these two visionary encounters of the same painting, I began to draw what I had seen in my sketchbook. This started the translation phase, bringing the inner solution of my artistic problem to an outward form. I drew the body and worked on the computer to help me plot an accurate texture map of the electric grid around the hyper-mindsphere. I then assembled the various elements and stretched a fairly large canvas, because I wanted the viewer to identify with a “life-sized” figure. Finally, I started painting. After many months of

work, my wife Allyson continued to ask me about an unconsidered area of the painting. This was the space beneath the hyper-mindsphere. I hadn’t noticed the space in my visions except that it was dark. This was a puzzling dilemma, which lasted for a week or two, because “empty” looked wrong or unconsidered, yet what belonged there?

As is sometimes our custom when we are aesthetically “stumped” and need to see our work with fresh and creative eyes, Allyson and I smoked marijuana and gazed at the piece. Suggestions of what should appear in the empty space began to coalesce. Stars obviously, but this was not just outer space, this was inner space, the place of numinous angels or demons, of Terence’s “self-dribbling basketballs,” beings with skin like a Fabergé egg, the oddly glowing mindspheres anticipating the transformative megasphere above. This seemed like the appropriate answer among the many that occurred to me. Work on the piece lasted almost a year.

Part of the function of the vision and the creative process is the integration of the inspired moment, via the art object or event, into the world beyond the studio, a process that continues as I share this story. We made a poster of this piece, and it will be reproduced in my new book, *Transfiguration*. Allyson and I have decided to retain the actual piece for the Chapel of Sacred Mirrors.

For myself as well as other artists, entheogens have played a crucial role in the creative process. However, I don’t advocate that artists live in a constant haze of chemically-altered consciousness, and some sensitive artists should completely steer clear of the substances.

Vision drugs catalyze our inherently visionary and potentially mystical dimensions of consciousness. May they be recognized and honored for the powerful and sacred substances that they are, proof of the importance and infinite vastness of the subtle inner worlds of imagination and illumination, and may they open an endless source of inspiration for new universal sacred art. •

#### Notes

1) Rollo May examines the phases of creation in his inspiring book, *The Courage to Create*. Betty Edwards has written a number of excellent books, including *Drawing on the Artist Within*, which is where some of the creativity research is discussed. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Herman Helmholtz, a physicist, Henri Poincaré, a mathematician, and Jacob Getzels, a psychologist, all worked on a theory of the stages of the creative process.

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