Creating Cruelty

Questioning the role of suffering in Arts practice

Short Story for Taos 2019

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please credit the artist in the image attached

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Carmen Ostrander MA

An Australian Narrative and Expressive Arts therapist, with a long history of engagement with creative and community based practices.

Her independent (private) practice offers low barrier support to artists, queer and gender non-conforming folks. Her collaborations challenge a number of therapeutic conventions around neutral therapeutic personas and overlapping relationships, which if strictly observed would exclude her from the pride and nourishment that participation brings.

Creating Cruelty

I’ve been inspired by many past and present associates of Taos and was delighted to participate in the 25th anniversary gathering. I took the opportunity to share (as a research proposal) a line of enquiry that’s been close to my heart, with the intention of pursuing a PhD. I’ve worked in the arts most of my life. Artists make up the bulk of my independent practice as a Narrative & Expressive Arts Therapist in Vancouver. What transpired from witnessing diverse expressions of collaborative and social constructionist practices from around the world, was a reassessment of the relevance of this proposal in the current social and political context. Though my assertions remain long and deeply held, other questions (geared towards ethics in arts practice) clamor with greater urgency to be explored. I’m grateful to park these ideas here for now and share them condensed as food for thought.

If I asked you to conjure images of ‘the artist’s life’, what comes to mind? How consistent are these front of mind images with people you know? Did you see a beret, wine bottles, and a cold dimly lit garret, with a sad impoverished figure working alone into the night?

The limiting trope of the ‘tortured artist’ is an enduring one, perhaps most famously characterized by Van Gogh. It is closely followed by the equally unhelpful construct of ‘the starving artist’. The confusing romanticism and glorification of poor living standards, belies the lived experience of practicing artists, makers, and designers, working in ‘creative industries’. Industries its skilled and dedicated laborers are rarely captains of.

Many artists are driven to achieve social justice, working in solidarity with other marginalized communities, through artful expressions of resistance, but are hesitant to speak to the persistence of limiting discourses in their own lives. I assert that identity conclusions that regard artists as unstable, unreliable and extraneous members of society, constitute a form of civilized oppression; in that it is unjust, widely held, and systemic. A form of oppression perpetuated by market forces, supported by the media, subject to regulation, and censorship. We can gauge the success of the subjugation by the degree to which artists have internalized common constructs, such as broad acceptance of hardship and poor working conditions as an inevitable (natural) part of arts practice.

Suffering can be reasoned as a deserved outcome for lapses in productivity and originality. Divergent thinking (creativity) is as prone to being patholigized as it is to praise. Perhaps it is easier to search for evidence of a biological quirk common to tortured eccentric artists, than to acknowledge the gains that have come from the maddening conditions created for them. Considerable research has found no correlation between ‘madness’ and creativity. In his letters, Van Gough himself stated that he made art despite his illness, not because of it. The emphasis on melancholy in practice, also serves to diminish the considerable cannon of works existing at the ecstatic end of the spectrum. I can’t help but wonder if this is partly due to the positioning of artists as surrogates of sadness, that allow us to keep our own despair at arms length, neatly framed.

Open any time capsule interned for posterity, and you’ll find cultural products included amongst our proudest achievements. With no reliable correlation between value and compensation in the arts, capitalism has separated artists from conversations on worth. Dollar value is the domain of gallerists, dealers, and auction houses, with meaning and significance constructed by curators, critics and academics. Evidence of suffering for ones art, by packaging tales of tragic and hopefully slightly salacious lives is always considered a bonus for buyers.

I ask you to consider the ways in which creativity contributes to your quality of life? In what ways are you able to support and appreciate these contributions as the result of meaningful work that upholds the dignity of the person who produced it? Holding the mechanics of oppression up against the mythology of the dysfunctional artist for closer examination.