



Art for our sake

Opinion piece by Denis Joe March 2016

The purpose of art is manifold these days. Visit a gallery and you are encouraged to interact with works. Artists, particularly Installation Artists, create pieces that rely on the audience to push buttons, pull levers, physically enter into the work, etc. in order for the works to have any 'meaning'. The contemplative nature of art, that demands we engage with a work on an emotional and intellectual level, has become marginalised, as 'fun' has become the only criteria that allows us to endow a work with value.

Art is no longer something that we reflect on, that we interrogate, that allows us to understand the world that little bit more. Art is no longer something that we are expected to treasure, that stays with us. If it does not satisfy our insatiable desire for fun or for comfort, in the here and now, it is nothing.

It seems that art must no longer speak of the universal. It is true that artists have drawn on their own lived experiences in order to provide form for their work and endow it with meaning. But once that work had entered into the wider world, the audience would see in it something different from the intent of the artist. They would provide it with a meaning that they could understand.

Once a work enters the public domain it ceases to be something owned by the artist, his original intent is lost as well as himself, in as much as he ceases to be as an artist. As with a worker, who creates consumer goods, the artist, is only recognised once he is either working, or called upon to create a work.

Reducing art to the level of entertainment may, in itself, seem like a harmless activity however, as it is not wholly the case that art suffers as a result of it being used as a source of entertainment. There may well be more bad art being produced today than at any time since man decided to draw pictures on cave walls as a result of the changing view as to what constitutes art that is my major concern, but equally this degenerated view of art says much about us as human beings and how we view ourselves.

I see in the promotion of art these days, in the desire to provide something to enjoy and a way of creating other positive feelings for us, the same form of snobbishness that we find railed against readers of certain newspapers. The assumption of a new elite is, it seems, that so many of us do not have an intellectual capacity to appreciate art. Much talk about 'inclusiveness' raises the populist view of the old elite who coveted the high arts, because they treasured them. This new elite are not saying to us that we should adapt to the view of the old elite and learn to appreciate the arts. They seem to be saying that there is nothing to appreciate, that to appreciate something is to be judgmental, and being judgmental is to discriminate and thus

anti-inclusive.

Another, more insidious function of art is its use as therapy. Many who participate in the arts will have some familiarity with Art Therapy as a practitioner, artist or member of an audience. The relative popularity of 'open mic' nights, in places where people sing songs and read out poetry is a prime example, especially for those who read pieces out. Like drunkards and drug-abusers, they claim to self medicate. The audience, who have nothing to relate to, becomes a barometer: the level of applause is in direct proportion to how much greater their level of self-confidence will be for that evening. They take pride in having never attempted to read serious poetry beyond the occasional verse that has fallen into cliché. They may well be ignorant of the subject of art therapy, taking their lead from Gloria Gaynor's song, 'I Will Survive'. Their pretension towards the craft of poetry is to be applauded. But it goes beyond that.

When we find a particularly personal post on Facebook, for example, it may stop us in our tracks. We may well find it disturbing being invited to play the role of the voyeur, yet this is what is expected of audiences in many areas of art. We as an audience play a double role: as a member of a group of people, brought together in a common bond of appreciation of an activity, and as temporary parents who do not pass judgement on the child's drawing or piece of writing beyond saying "Very good!" Then attaching it to the fridge door. This is most that the child can expect. It is an exhibition that will find no greater audience beyond the confines of the family and, perhaps, a few friends.

Art Therapy isn't something that has arisen in contemporary times, it took its tentative steps around the mid 20 century. The British artist Adrian Hill coined the term art therapy in 1942. Hill, recovering from tuberculosis in a sanatorium, discovered the therapeutic benefits of drawing and painting while convalescing. He wrote that the value of art therapy lay in "completely engrossing the mind (as well as the fingers) ... releasing the creative energy of the frequently inhibited patient", which enabled the patient to "build up a strong defense against his

misfortunes". He suggested artistic work to his fellow patients. That began his art therapy work, which was documented in 1945 in his book, *Art Versus Illness*. Hill was later joined by another artist, Edward Adamson, who helped in promoting Art Therapy in long stay mental institutions.

Research at the time acknowledged the influence of aesthetics, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, rehabilitation, early childhood education, and art education, to varying degrees. It was the rehabilitation aspect (which we commonly know as occupational therapy these days) that determined whether the therapy had any value for the patient. Inferred in Hill's writings is the awareness that the practitioner must make a judgement, both on the patient's progress and the work that they produce. Only through criticism could the practitioner gauge what, if any, progress was made. For Hill and Adamson, Art Therapy was intended to compliment psychiatric treatment, not challenge it.

The 1960s saw a backlash against psychiatry, partly spurred on by the publication of the American psychiatrist, Thomas S. Szasz's Book *The Myth of Mental Illness*. Over the following years the concept of self-help took hold, even within groups calling for social change, such as the feminist movement (for an excellent account of the rise and practices of the self-help movement in America, I would highly recommend Wendy Kaminer's book,

I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional

). Much of the counseling approaches of today find their roots in the backlash against psychiatry. Whereas psychiatry attempts to wade into the ocean that is the complexity of the human mind, self help groups kept it simple, by focusing on confidence. It seems as if practitioners had found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. As the government's

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approach ate into NHS mental health services with the closure of many wards in the late 1980s, counseling services mushroomed. Whilst the counseling sector never, consciously set itself against psychiatry, its simplicity: all that is needed is confidence, resonated with the individual patient and even to a wider society that felt defeated by the policies of the 'Thatcher years'.

Confidence can be found throughout talking therapies. But that arises from one-to-one sessions. In these times of low expectation it is the victim and the survivor that is held up as a model for humanity. And so private progress between a practitioner and a patient is no longer enough. The patient's progress has to be publicly acknowledged.

NHS institutions will often contract out counseling services and this, invariably means launching short term projects, such as writing groups. Funding from the Arts Council is less to do with the quality of the work proposed and more to do with what an institution or individual artist can provide for the community, preferably one that has been deemed to be 'marginalised'. These projects can end in the publication of a book of writings from a group or a performance in a theatre or concert hall, anything that will suggest that the pain of a particular community or individual has been overcome.

It would be easy to sneer at such projects and dismiss them as a cheap activity that gives the idea that something is being done, but that is to ignore a fundamental shift in society. We tend not to see virtue in the potential for greatness and, more worryingly, that our world is becoming transformed into one large therapy session. Whether we are exhorted to treat art as fun or as something that will empower us, this leads us to diminish the true potential of art to impact more meaningfully on our lives.

We cannot say with certainty what art does for us. There are many people who do not visit galleries, read books or attend concerts. There are those who are moved by a symphony by Mahler but cannot stand Bruckner, there are those who love the warmth of a painting by Edward Hopper but are chilled to the bone by Jackson Pollock and those who find inspiration in the works of W B Yeats, but emptiness in the works of James Joyce. Discrimination arises from contemplation. When we are confronted by a work of art it should spur us on to find a meaning, it should create a dialogue between our being and our soul. We may find things that unsettle us, we may find an overwhelming love for a work. Whatever! We become richer having engaged.

Art Therapy, whether in the form of having fun or gaining confidence, reduces all art to one homogeneous blob. It chips away at the fundamentals of what it means to be human. It admonishes greatness whilst lighting candles at the altar of mediocrity. It is a bandage bought from Poundland.