

Alchemy for the masses

Why we need art in this pandemic



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Grayson Perry's Art Club and NHS rainbows. Museums in Quarantine and pavement politics. We need art and art needs us. From prehistoric cave paintings to Italian frescos, scientific drawings to the avant-garde movements, sculpture to abstract installations, artists have always contributed to human development.

When our physical freedom is restricted, we are compelled to confront our ideas and imagination, more intensely. The more we withdraw to our homes or to self-isolation, the longer we spend within ourselves. For millions, this was the norm before the Covid-19 crisis. For others, this has been a traumatic and terrifying experience even when all their material needs are met. For some people, new forms of expression and creativity have emerged from the time and space this crisis has provided. Art, by which I mean here, visual art (rather than 'the arts' in a wider sense to include music, drama and film et al.) inhabits many places – real and imagined. As one of these places is in the mind, it is no surprise that its value to us now is priceless.

The power of seeing

Whether it's one of Monet's *Water Lily Ponds* or a Turner seascape, art is both an objective and a subjective event – the object seen and the effect of the process of seeing. It is always an encounter into which we are invited or coerced. It acts as neither host nor bouncer and we are welcome guests. Art, has the power to evoke or affect the human capacity to feel. The distinctive ability to feel,

and to have a range of feelings, extends beyond the emotions, to the capacity and sensitivity to interpret and reason with other human beings. This dynamic between art and feeling is what we mean when we talk of the philosophy of beauty or 'aesthetics'.

One of the roles of art is to communicate our feelings and emotions, thoughts and ideas, fantasies and realities to the rest of the world. These can be about collective suffering and destruction such as Picasso's *Guernica*, or a lover's suicide in Millais' *Ophelia* or the subconscious in Dali's *The Dream*. Art acts as a metonym – that which we can only describe in part represents a greater truth than words will allow when presented in a visual form. Art reveals and hides, it shows and tells in symbolic measure. While words need translating from one language to another, art is a universal language with its own lexicon. So we can laugh at Leonardo Da Vinci's *Last Supper* being updated, as just one of many famous paintings that have been given a comic social distancing makeover during this period.

Capturing the moment

The NHS rainbows that decorate our windows promote awareness and appreciation regardless of who painted them. They are democracy in action: their creators do not need a degree in art. The simple invitation to everybody – create a rainbow to thank the NHS for healing the nation – is a collective sign of gratitude and inclusivity. This meteorological and biblical phenomenon

has become the symbol for all our hospital communities.

Similarly, local projects to paint the portraits of our key workers also signify a renewed respect for humanity and a desire to capture this value on canvas. They create a memory bank, as do posters of the inspirational Captain Sir Tom Moore with the hashtags #walkwithtom and #TomorrowWillBeAGoodDay. At 99 years old, walking 100 laps of his garden with a zimmer frame is in itself staggering. Raising over £33 million for the NHS shows the power of community kindness. This feat of resilience, hope and appreciation from the very generation so many think should be discarded, is rightly advertised around the UK – and its depiction in art has been integral to how it has been embedded into the national Covid-19 story.

Documenting the journey

Art is about encounters and journeys. It feeds and directs us in unexpected ways. These can be joyous or sad, inspiring or disturbing, didactic or comedic. Whatever we experience, the one thing art never does is allow us to forget. Art always keeps its own diary for generations to come. It is the Samuel Pepys of paint.

Grayson Perry, one of Britain's leading artists, is one such diarist. He collaborated with Channel 4 to create an art club for the UK. Perry is on a mission to unleash our collective creativity and unite the nation through art, as we live through this unique situation. He wants us to record and remember this pandemic together. Each week he works on his own sculpture and pottery; he invites anyone to submit their work based on set themes, from which he chooses a selection for a public exhibition post-lockdown; and interviews a celebrity who creates their own art and chooses their own preferences from what is submitted.¹ Perry chooses artwork based not purely on technique or skill but essence and feeling. His art club welcomes everyone and every work of art equally. It is the antithesis of every rulebook which defines 'good art' by ancient rubrics. Renaissance artists would weep as they saw their definition of 'brilliance' to have been in vain. A lively exploration of 'what is art' can be found in Perry's superb Reith Lectures, *Playing to the Gallery*.²

Do-it-yourself art

From the start of the UK's official lockdown in March with the closure of every public art space, the role of art became more necessary in our lives. Just as war artists such as Paul Nash and Stanley Spencer have always documented the terrain from wherever they were stationed by illustrating death or victory, so street artists everywhere are showing us visual dossiers on this plague. Buildings, walls and pavements have been displaying the mood – Banksy's *Girl with a Pierced Eardrum* gets a Covid-19 facemask.³ In using comfort or fear, or simple

warnings to stay at home, wear PPE and wash our hands, street art is more honest and convincing than many government guidelines.⁴

One innovative Dutch project recreates classic art with household items in order 'to kill time in quarantine'. This new social media phenomenon asks participants to re-make prominent works of

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art using everyday domestic objects. It is fun and resourceful; it is life imitating art with whatever's in your house. Sanitisers, toilet rolls and masks find their way into the ruffs of a Rembrandt, the kitsch of a Kahlo and the hands of Michelangelo.⁵

Social cohesion and resilience

Creative thinkers and makers offer critiques of our political, economic and social systems, urging communities to engage thoughtfully and make steps toward social progress. As a national body which in part serves these aims, the Arts Council website states its mission clearly:

*When we talk about the value of arts and culture to society, we always start with its intrinsic value: how arts and culture can illuminate our inner lives and enrich our emotional world. This is what we cherish. However, we also understand that arts and culture have a wider, more measurable impact on our economy, health and wellbeing, society and education. It's important we also recognise this impact to help people think of our arts and culture for what they are: a strategic national resource.*⁶

Art therapists have campaigned for years to demonstrate art's huge contribution to wellbeing. It can provide hope and joy, adventure and surprise, comfort and solace. Many famous artists have defended the therapeutic values of art such as Vincent Van Gogh, who painted some of his most accomplished works while recovering in Saint-Paul's Asylum, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, France. Or the abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock, diagnosed with bipolar disorder and battling alcoholism for most of his life. Pollock felt as though the process of psychoanalysis through painting tapped into his subconscious and was key to his healing and recovery.

Art as therapy is a widespread activity in schools, prisons, hospitals, care homes and other community networks worldwide. A study by Dr Rosalia Staricoff found that patients took on average 70mg less pain medication per day when arts were introduced into their care environment.⁷ Art offers many tools – physical and spiritual – with which to navigate any situation, no matter how

NOTES

1. www.channel4.com/press/news/graysons-art-club
2. 'Playing to the Gallery' - www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03969vt
3. <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-1-banksys-girl-with-a-pierced-eardrum-gets-a-covid-19-face-mask-11977360>
4. www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/mar/25/street-artists-coronavirus-us-it-feels-like-wartime
5. www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVXu1U_p8A
6. www.artscouncil.org.uk/exploring-value-arts-and-culture/value-arts-and-culture-people-and-society#
7. <https://artuk.org/discover/stories/art-as-therapy-highlighting-artworks-in-nhs-collections>
8. A de Botton, & J Armstrong, *Art as Therapy* (London: Phaidon Press, 2016), cf. p. 64.
9. www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2020-05/beauty-art-faith-consolation-vatican-museum-41.html
10. www.vaticannews.va/en/pope-francis/mass-casa-santa-marta/2020-05/pope-francis-mass-santa-marta-homily.html

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11. www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000hqmn

12. <https://artuk.org/>

13. <https://artuk.org/discover/stories/showcasing-the-nations-art-online-during-the-covid-19-outbreak>

dire, such as the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum's collection of art made under conditions of extreme danger. These artworks embody the emotions that accompanied the prisoners every day. They provide us with a picture of this concentration camp that is hard to re-create today.

Art reduces anxiety, channels anger and fends off loneliness. It is a lifelong companion with its capacity to offer us inspiration and delight in any form or shape. Art at its best mirrors what we need to see, not just what we would like to see.

**we need art to equip us
to create a better society
together**

It helps us to become more aware, to act and to be generous. It is altruistic and healing. In *Art as Therapy* by Alain de Botton and John Armstrong, the authors argue art has seven functions that can counter our psychological frailties: remembering; hope; sorrow; rebalancing; self-understanding; growth and appreciation.⁸ These functions are essential right now as we try to recall life before the virus, and journey on in hope – Goya is ideal for getting us to the other side. The sorrow of those who have died, especially those we have known and loved requires an acute sensitivity that art can provide – Mantegna will be your friend. We have become deeply aware of who is keeping us alive whether as frontline workers, or in acts of kindness from neighbours and strangers – look at Lowry for the love of people. We are appreciating each other more than ever – Renoir paints a good party. The multiple losses to our status quo are teaching us new ways to adapt – Mondrian can help you think outside the box.

Word over image in religion

Art has shaped many of the world's religions since the beginning of time and continues to be a major vehicle for veneration, worship and prayer. However, in the West, the authoritative preference is for the primacy of the text – the word over the image. Traditions such as Hinduism and Eastern Christianity favour the primacy of the image and differentiate as sacramental and creative, in linguistic and cultural attitudes from those religions, such as some elements within Protestant Christianity and Judaism that emphasise the primacy of the word and pragmatic and rational language.

The study of Christianity is predicated on the authority of the written text, the Bible, and not upon the image. The reading of these canons employs exegesis as the basis for study, debate and interpretation. The written word appears to incorporate art in this process only to illustrate, explain or disseminate the relevant themes.

However, the Catholic Church has always pursued a visual religious tradition because it believes it is a vehicle for evangelisation. In utilising the didactic and catechetical potential of art, Catholicism has provided the world with many of the best paintings, mosaics and sculptures ever created. Since the crucifixion of Jesus, the cross has become the ultimate and universal symbol of the Christian faith.

On the Vatican Museum website Pope Francis tell us that 'beauty creates communion. It unites onlookers from a distance, uniting past, present and future'. He believes that during this Covid-19 crisis, beauty will offer us hope. He has created a new project to show masterpieces from the Vatican collection accompanied by his own words.⁹ He says, 'It is artists who often interpret this silent groan which weighs on every creature and is expressed above all in the heart of men and women, for "man is a beggar before God"'.¹⁰

Accessible and affordable

For many people, art is regarded as elitist, incomprehensible, inaccessible, expensive and boring. It is not a priority. Right now, looking at Pre-Raphaelite paintings or Rothko's *Orange and Yellow* might seem absurd luxuries to the people who live in Indian shacks or rat-infested council flats closer to home. Is it actually offensive to spend time considering the Sistine Chapel while the death toll rises?

Art is more than the content and context in which it exists. Art does not need to be commodified or canonised for it to have value, and nor should it compete with our bare necessities. When art is freely available, it feeds the community without a price. Maximising the showing of collections from our creative canon has been a key challenge for public art galleries and museums everywhere. *Museums in Quarantine* is an excellent portal from which to enjoy fine art, sculpture, abstract and modern art through virtual tours and talks from our worldwide institutes of art.¹¹ To be taken around the British Museum, the National Gallery or the Louvre by knowledgeable curators has enabled many people who would not normally step inside these buildings to enjoy art without prejudice. A big element of this increased visitor traffic is that it is free; it does not require travel or a timeslot, it does not prohibit those with a disability, or assume prior knowledge of what is exhibited; and it does not judge us by what we do or do not like. The pressure to admire a painting that leaves us cold or confused has alienated people for too long and prevented them from enjoying plenty of other art that might transform their souls.

Since they were required to close their physical doors, galleries have been opening them everywhere online. These windows onto art remind us that self-isolation is not new. From the Edward Hopper *Nighthawks* to the *Woman Reading a Letter*

in Vermeer's Dutch interiors; Edvard Munch's *The Scream* or Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, we know that loneliness and insecurity have been laid bare for centuries like cutlery on a table.

Another excellent example of making art accessible comes from Art UK. This is the online home for every public art collection in the UK,¹² representing a collaboration between over 3,200 British institutions. Through its charitable work, it makes art available for everyone and all age groups, for enjoyment, learning and research. Art UK has recently digitised 250,000 images for our solace and diversion.¹³ While the computer becomes then a mediator between art and the viewer, these initiatives can nevertheless offer us tools for education, nourishment and therapy while we wait patiently to see the real thing.



Alchemy for the masses

Artists are like alchemists. They can transform a few random materials into objects imbued with spiritual and aesthetic value long before they command a material value or become a fridge magnet. This alchemy may have varying results, but either way, it creates a transformation of the mind and heart. Rodin's *The Thinker* started as a lump of bronze and is now the archetypal symbol of philosophy and reflection.

Art's capacity to adapt and change shape according to its environment, since it can be created and seen anywhere and in any place, enables us to embrace our vulnerability, interconnection and mystery in any place and at any time. In a world where everything appeared to be within our grasp, and dominant societies could conceal iniquitous levels of inequality, we need art to show us how to reject societies centred on consumption and unlimited accumulation



PICTURES

Edvard Munch, *The Scream*. Oil, tempera and pastel on cardboard, 91 x 73 cm. 1893. National Gallery of Norway.

Johannes Vermeer, *Woman reading a letter*. Oil on canvas; ca. 1662–1663. Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

and market economies that devour the weakest. We need art to equip us to create a better society together. Art is alchemy for the masses because it has the capacities and skills we will need to survive this crisis and come out the other side stronger.

Here are some that art can help promote:

Capacities

- A sense of awe, wonder, mystery – there is more to things than meets the eye.*
- A sense that the past and the familiar can teach us as much as the new and glamorous.*
- A sense of pattern, sequence, order, purpose.*
- A sense of self-worth and the worth of others.*
- A sense of community: its demands, values, rituals, celebrations.*
- Awareness of limitation, frustration, loss, the darker side of life.*
- Awareness of the natural world and its capacity to point beyond itself.*

Skills

- An ability to be still and to look carefully.*
- An ability to listen and reflect.*
- An ability to feel sympathetically for and with others.*
- An ability to think and respond with sensitivity and imagination.*
- An ability to interpret and evaluate experience.*
- An ability to cope with paradox and contradiction.*

We have no idea of how much this pandemic will redefine our lives. As we face these months and years to come, art is a vital resource on which we should all draw.