

## Two aspects of art: Suicide mental illness and therapy

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### Abstract

Examining the life stories of some productive artists; it is seen that they struggle with mental illnesses, intensely deal with the thought of death and they even commit suicide. On the other hand, we believe that art has a curative power. Art therapy is known by physicians, therapists and trainers. Art is also used in various ways for treatment. If the process of creation pulls an artist into a mental illness and thoughts about death, then how does it possibly cure? This text tries to explain the dilemma in question.

Keywords: art, mental illness, therapy, suicide, madness.

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## 1. Introduction

Two oppositions those appear while trying to understand life poses an insoluble and inapprehensible problematic. It is known that many artists have either lost their mind or committed suicide throughout history. Writers, critics and audience think that art is a process of creativity that deranges the health of artists and even drives them suicide. On the other hand, the use of art therapy in healing patients with mental disorders shows the other aspect of art. This assertion discusses two opposite aspects of art; in other words, the two aspects that drive an individual suicide make them sick and also heal them.

## 2. Suicide and Madness

History of art shows that many famous artists have either committed suicide or been stigmatized as lunatics. The famous Italian author Cesare Pavese (1908–1950), artist, playwright and ferocity theatre theoretician Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), world famous author Ernest Hemingway (1889-1961), Iranian author Sadik Hidayet (1903- 1951), American poet Sylvia Plath (1932-1963), Austrian author, playwright, journalist and biography writer Stefan Zweig (1881-1942), English author Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) are among the artists that committed suicide. Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) who still puzzles the brains of modern psychiatrists with his diagnosis of mental illness. (1853 – 1890), Antonin Artaud who is believed to have committed suicide due to his mental illness and Salvador Dali (1904-1989) who was a surrealist artist who had weird behaviours are remembered with “madness” stigma.

Psychiatrist Velioglu (1978) suggests that ordinary people consider artists different from themselves. The belief in artists to be mysterious, semi-god, semi-mad, weird and strange people living outside of social rules has been inherited from Shamanism. Similarly, the belief in creativity to be related with divine inspiration has been inherited from Romanticism. Mental imbalance or mental illness is an exaggerated mythic thought and a stigma ascribed for artists that separates them from other people. Besides, there are a very limited number of successful, rational and mentally healthy artists.

It has been believed that art has a healing power since ancient ages, but it is hard to mention the goodness of art for artists that commit suicide, lose their mind or are stigmatized as lunatics. If art has a healing power; does it also have a power that ruins the mental health or drive individuals suicide? Considering the lives of aforementioned artists and people related with art; it could be suggested that they commit suicide due to the stress caused by their time and incidents, exhausting burden of fame, social tremors, wars or some mental illnesses they may catch like everyone else. It may not be a realistic demeanour to associate the only reason of death of aforementioned artists with art or their interest in art.

## 3. Example of Van Gogh and Others

Universally popular artist Vincent van Gogh, who is known and liked even by people that are not artistically trained, had burnt his hand in candle light, cut his ear and attempted suicide at an asylum, which have all made him as famous as his paintings. The light of curiosity aroused by madness stigma enables us to see the colors of paintings more vividly. Artists produce such beautiful paintings owing to madness, suicide; our faith affects our eyes. On the other hand, many authors think that reality is different. Rudolf Arnheim (1977) suggests that the sense of style is affected as a result of breaking off from outer reality in psychotic art. According to Arnheim (1977), there are great differences between the paintings of Van Gogh before his illness and the paintings he produced at the asylum in the final

stage of his life. In his illness period, nature lines portrayed with vivid colors were replaced by complex lines weakened by empty wrappings. Artaud (1991) holds Doctor Gachet and society responsible for the suicide of Van Gogh. The artist's new ideas in art had annoyed society. The incidents that started with cutting his own ear were just an excuse for being locked in an asylum or being made go to the asylum. Artaud's justification is important. "One can speak of the good mental health of van Gogh in a world in which every day one eats vagina cooked in green sauce or penis of newborn child whipped and beaten to a pulp, just as it is when plucked from the sex of its mother" (1991). In his article, Shoham (2008) mentions Van Gogh as a revolutionist artist. He examines the relationship of Artaud and Van Gogh with madness based on the article of Artaud about Van Gogh. Considering the reasons of mental illness; biological structure, childhood experiences, social pressures, environmental maladaptation or stigma of individuals come into prominence. Shoham (2008) suggests that there was a biologically serious potential in the family of Van Gogh in terms of mental illness. Madness stigma by society, epilepsy history of his father and a number of maternal relatives, psychosis of his sisters Wil and Car, anxiety and depression attacks of Teo, suicide attempts of his sisters signify the biological susceptibility. Van Gogh had left home when he was 16, led a bumme life in different cities, lived in London and Paris as a Protestant priest, at a missionary school in Amsterdam as a student and at asylums for almost four years. The artist defined his childhood as "cold, gloomy and isolated". Shoham (2008) suggests that the diagnoses made by doctors based on the aforementioned life story are a kind of stigma and clues from his life story are not enough for these diagnoses. Creativity of the artist was ended by doctors. According to him, both social stigma and tendency to madness could be overcome when used by artists for creativity. The behaviors of Van Gogh concerning madness could be explained with the fact that he had burnt his hand in candle light, desired to prove his love for a girl and tried to make people believe in the accuracy of obstructed feelings. His act of cutting his ear, on the other hand, is associated with the disappointment of innovative, hopeful and vital creative dreams by Gauguin. In other words, they can not be considered as unreasonable, nonsensical or psychotic behaviors. In the light of available data; Velioglu (1978) suggests that Van Gogh was not schizophrenic. He also suggests that his art was not schizophrenic, either.

Considering the suicides of other celebrities; Artoud was hospitalized in a psychiatry clinic and received electroshock treatment when Nazis occupied France. Pavese was arrested due to his anti-fascist thoughts. Hemingway was wounded in the World War I and joined the World War II as a journalist who drank all the time. Sadik Hidayet was highly sensitive about the incidents in his country and he had a drug problem. The writer had probably committed suicide due to unhappiness and depression after the World War II, just like many others. Plath was a writer of death and suicide starting from her first lines. She had struggled with bipolar disorder throughout her life since young ages. Plath is among the writers that transformed her mental illness into an outstanding process of creativity. She would still have committed suicide due to her bipolar disorder even if she had not been a writer. Rumor has it that she had a love and jealousy story behind her suicide. Art can not be the only reason of the artist's death.

Psychiatry contains a number of studies on the mental health of artists. Having a steady methodology; the study of Nancy Andreasen et al. signifies no relationship between creativity and schizophrenia (Karacay, 2009). In his study; Soygur (1999) searched many relevant articles. According to him, despite the accumulations and supplies of a number of researches on artistic creativity and madness, there are still contradictory thoughts and questions at the point being reached.

Today, popular culture continues to use the art works produced by lunatics as mythic meta. If an artist has a psychiatric background, his works apparently have a high value of meta. Having recently displayed his works in art magazines and held exhibitions at famous museums and galleries of the world; Yayoi Kusama (1929-) is an artist diagnosed with mental health and psychiatric problems. He was diagnosed as he had hallucinations during his adolescence, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. He had a different and a less dangerous diagnosis when he was 48; obsessional neurosis. Today, Kusama lives in a psychiatry clinic in the evening and at his workshop in the daytime on his own accord (Kouri, 2013). Showing sane artists as insane may indicate the profit anxieties of the art market. Today, it is

possible for madness to be associated with art market rather than art and an economy-linked medal that is used by art market.

#### 4. Therapy

Mentioning the healing power of art; De Botton and Armstrong (2013) arrange the favours of art for the whole humanity in their book "Art as a Therapy" as follows:

a) Art removes the memory losses, b) It gives hope, c) It canonizes the sorrow, d) It helps us balance our nature, e) It guides us in knowing ourselves, f) It urges us to extend our repertoire concerning the experiences of other people and g) It revives our feelings. Art is good for readers, audience and listeners. On the other hand, this condition has a more special meaning for the "artistic" relationship established with patients that suffer from psychosis.

Art Therapy is related with concepts like "treatment with art", "music therapy", "dance therapy", and "occupation therapy". All these therapy styles believe that art is good for lunatics and non-lunatics. Some of them are named after the art type that is used for solving problems. It is known that Ancient Turks, Seljukians and Ottomans used music as a means of therapy (Erer & Atici, 2010). Gencil (2006) suggests that a number of tribes and cults in Africa and America use music in the treatment of diseases today. However, art therapy is related with a field of psychotherapy that approaches to the subject scientifically and professionalizes increasingly. Art therapy uses visual arts as well. Art therapy comprises a number of fields. As this article is concerned with madness in institutions concerning physical and mental health, educational institutions, women's shelters, etc., it mentions the functions of art therapy in healing mental disorders here.

From the old times, art therapy has tried to specialize in healing the patients diagnosed with psychosis. As is known; patients diagnosed with psychosis have highly disrupted thoughts and emotions. Patients that have hallucinations also lose the sense of reality. For instance, a psychosis patient with paranoid thoughts may believe that he is followed or deceived. These thoughts might lead to severe personality changes and unrealistic behaviors in patients.

Art therapy does not only help patients from the field of art. It concerns all patients. Relevant training is conducted by a trained art therapist that knows the theories of esthetics and psychotherapy and has experience in working within a psychiatry team. The processes of relationship and treatment are conducted via a personal or a group therapy with patients that suffer from psychosis. As well as antipsychotic drugs, psychotherapy is provided for the purpose of fixing the relationship of patients with reality and helping them regain their personality integrity.

What is good in the art therapy do to patients that suffer from psychosis? How does it succeed it? Foster (2003) suggests that patients with schizophrenia experience deep difficulties in establishing mutual relationships mainly due to their psychotic fear of establishing direct emotional relationships. They also avoid establishing therapeutic relationships due to psychotic fears. They generally prefer drawing in art therapy rooms to having psychotherapy sessions. Drawing is a non-verbal opportunity of communication that creates a possibility for expression. Drawings and clay sculptures produced by patients may open the ways of communication. Patients could re-establish communication with the outer reality or other people with the help of drawings, written expressions on drawings or clay sculptures. Art gathers thoughts and emotions in the unconscious and reveals images instead of words. Suppressed emotions and thoughts could be expressed by being symbolized with visual images. Whether artistically trained or not; every individual is accepted to express their inner conflicts and suppressed emotions via visual forms. Interpretation of drawings by the therapist directs the process of communication to be planned. Therapists reach the inner world of patients by means of drawings. Information that are obtained during art therapies are used in psychotherapy and shared with therapy team. The respect that is showed towards patients in art therapy rooms signifies leaning

to reality, having self-belief, being appreciated, encouraging and establishing communication with therapist or other patients in the group. Art therapy is a part of the treatment, which aims to bring refunctioning and social adaptation for patients. In short, it signifies drawing, conducting three-dimensional activities and enabling patients to express themselves and their emotions during these activities in the interventions of healing a patient that suffers from psychosis, and it is the most useful and functional dimension of art in being used as a means, though not in a broad sense.

Together with Jean Debuffet (1901-1985), the art works of mental patients dealing with painting and sculpting are also involved among the art works of individuals that are alienated from society. The interest of psychiatry environments and increasing popularity of Debuffet's Art Brut thoughts have made different consciousness reflected by patients that are hospitalized in asylums for years on paper and canvas visible and aroused an interest in unknown worlds. The similarities between the paintings of mental patients and modern paintings have caused a number of masterpieces to be displayed in art museums and become a part of big personal collections. Today, some of asylums bring the paintings of mental patients and art consumers together. Gugging Hospital in Austria sells the paintings of patients with chronic schizophrenia (Schüssler, 2004).

## 5. Conclusion

It has not been scientifically proved whether or not art or dealing with art would cause mental disorders. The reasons of death or sickness of famous artists that commit suicide and get sick may not be associated with the profession of art. One of the most important evidences that creativity may not cause madness is healthy artists that go deep into life and succeed. If we can not connect the reasons of deaths, diseases and suicides with the "superficial interest in art" in a world where some people commit suicide and some others die untimely and get sick; we can not connect what artists go through with the intense endeavour embarked in art, either. Healing power of art is not miraculous, either. Psychotic patients that had worked and painted at asylums without receiving art therapy for years were not discharged from the hospitals with full recovery. The term "art" used in art therapy, on the other hand, signifies using the communication power of art for medical purposes. Drugs, treatment team, patience of art therapist and respect that is showed towards patients all provide recovery. Recovery is the act of occasionally clutching onto the life with weak bonds. The power that heals patients in therapy is also the desire of individuals to help other people.

Considering in a broad sense; art is a means for a person to transfer emotions, thoughts and demands to another person. Even though these transfers may affect us either positively or negatively; they never kill us like a bullet from a gun. In the broadest sense, art is a peaceful activity even if the artist shots himself with a rifle on the arm. Even if art expresses things in a good or clumsy way; roses, mountains, sound of the wind, love or garbage, shattered corpses, stress of congested traffic and fears will make us recheck the life and stand it. Having a healing power; art closely deals with even the most disgusting subjects in the world. Even disgusting art works do open a new door to human thoughts. However, it could still be suggested that the field of art is a complex intellectual field that is full of prejudices about artists and the process of creativity due to its mysteries. The complexity may pave the way for the development of label, stigma and market tricks within the subjects of madness, suicide and healing.

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