

Creating being, here and now

It really has been a tumultuous time here in kwaZulu-Natal where we, at the Church Land Programme, are based! Perhaps the time will come to write something more directly about what has happened (or is still happening) but for now, the demands of our context require that we continue to think about being as well as we can in our here and now. And indeed, if the dimensions of our experience of the current context exceed what can be contained in prose and words, it is perhaps good and right that in this edition of the current series we turn to the universe of creativity. [Trayci Tompkins](#) is well-known in creative circles in our part of the world. On July 16th, she commented on her search for ‘hope and comfort’ against ‘our brokenness as we face unprecedented times in South Africa this week’:

“We’re all on a total roller coaster of emotions as uncertainty reigns supreme... For me, I’ve taken to the studio, dug up all the anger, fear and uncertainty and thrown it into paint..because that’s what brings my soft voice back!”

On the same day, South African activist and writer, Mark Heywood, wrote:

“If I had my way at the moment I would only write poetry and I would only read poetry. ... This is not a strategy to escape the harsh realities of a crisis of violence, criminality and inequality in our country or a universal free-fall of civility and civilisation. In fact, it is the opposite; it is my strategy to try to communicate better and better to hear, understand and connect with the things the world is trying to convey to us through our primary medium of communication: words. No violence starts without words. ... As a writer and an activist, I am fearful that bad reading habits — haste in particular — is neutralising the restorative power of words. ... I want more slowness, not just more speed; more acknowledgment of uncertainty and vulnerability than pre-cooked prescriptions. ... I’m also beginning to rebel against the artificial certainty of writing prose. ... Not by accident perhaps, I came across Ted Hughes quoted as writing that ‘words are continually trying to displace our experiences. And in so far as they are stronger than the raw life of our experience, and full of themselves, and all the dictionaries they have digested, they do replace it.’ I make a pencil mark beside his words. NB.”

Mark Heywood 16 July 2021. "On reading poetry and quarrelling with myself"

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-07-16-on-reading-poetry-and-quarrelling-with-myself/>

So, this time around we invite you to get out the crayons and paper, to enter the spaces of music, drama & poetry, to explore the place of art in its many forms that speak to, and about, how well we are, and how well we could be.

The use and effectiveness of creative work and the arts is well established in the practices of mental health and therapy. The gifts for our wellbeing are there for us both when receive or enjoy art made or performed by others (“receptive” uses), and also when we actively create something ourselves, individually or in groups, in processes of ‘expressive therapy’ (“active” uses). All sorts of creative areas and disciplines can be drawn on – from visual imagery and art (like drawing and painting) through to storytelling, drama, music, poetry, dance, and horticulture. Visual art therapy often uses the creative process itself as a therapeutic intervention but visual art can also be used by a psychotherapist analytically to understand a client’s ideas better. Creative processes and activities can help us gain more insight into ourselves and also help bolster our capacities to handle life – from simply facing the challenges of ongoing daily life, to healing deeper layers of mental stress and trauma.

Creative expression and work have long and widely been connected with processing, sharing, and even healing, the good and the wounded, the shared and the private, of our human life experiences. In this broad sense, ‘art’ is considered by many to be essential to our human being – author Margaret Atwood tweeted earlier this year: “Human beings are story-tellers by nature. They make art because that’s what human beings do” (2021). And since even struggles against injustice, oppression or exploitation can themselves become brutalised and confined in scope and vision, it is vital to be vigilant and defend an orientation to full, abundant and overflowing life for all. In Kristin Ross’ extraordinary work on the Paris Commune, she excavates the revolutionary notion of ‘communal luxury’. In “The Survival of the Paris Commune”, Kristin Ross was interviewed for the first issue of *ROAR Magazine* – an interview that was reissued in the year of the 150th anniversary of the Paris Commune. Here, in a way that resonates with the invocation of full and abundant life - not as bourgeois luxury but perhaps as the properly political excess beyond situations where human flowering is trampled and frustrated, as ‘public beauty’ - she comments that:

“the phrase [‘communal luxury’ was] tucked away in the final sentence of the Manifesto Eugène Pottier, Courbet and other artists wrote when they were organizing during the Commune. For them the phrase expressed a demand for something like public beauty—the idea that everyone has the right to live and work in pleasing circumstances, the demand that art and beauty should not be reserved for the enjoyment of the elite, but that they be fully integrated into daily public life. This may seem a merely ‘decorative’ demand on the part of decorative artists and artisans, but it is a demand that in fact calls for nothing short of the total reinvention of what counts as wealth, what a society values. It is a call for the reinvention of wealth beyond exchange-value” (<https://roarmag.org/essays/kristin-ross-paris-commune-interview/>).

Of course a lot of ‘Art’ tramples on egalitarian aspiration and can be deployed to express and consolidate the power of elites, of abusers, of exploiters. The exemplary life-work of John Berger¹ is one among many critical voices pointing us to the oppressive capacity of some art, especially western traditions of painting and sculpture, against beauty and truth. Berger delineated aspects of critique in an early piece first published in 1967, “*Art and Property Now*”² (which was incorporated into the seminal *Ways of Seeing* in 1972) where he concludes:

“in our European societies as they are now, the unique work of art is doomed: it cannot escape being a ritual object of property, and its content, if not entirely complacent, cannot help but be an oppressive, because hopeless, attempt to deny this role”.

Other art goes in a very different direction though. Consider just one instance from the history of South Africa’s freedom struggle and the work of Thami Mnyele (1948 - 1985) who understood the role of the artist to “inspire not possession of commodities, but action, ... to encourage people to believe that what they did – rather than what they owned or consumed – would make their lives better” (Diana Wylie, 2009 “Thami Mnyele and the Art of Tragedy”³). Mnyele himself wrote:

“We need to clearly popularise and give dignity to the just thoughts and deeds of the people. With our brushes and paints we shall need to visualize the beauty of the country we would like our people to live in. We therefore need to humble ourselves as to heed the people’s word ... [and] base our collectivity on a less bellicose patriotism and avoid a narrow and chauvinistic definition of ourselves” (Thami Mnyele, “*Observations on the state of contemporary visual arts in South Africa*”⁴).

1 Padkos regularly will recall a documentary bioscope offering from padkos in 2017: "John Berger 1926-2017: A modest introduction and remembering" after his death at 90.

2 <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3032-art-and-property-now>

3 In: Clive Kellner and Gonzalez, Sergio-Albio (ed/s), 2009. *Thami Mnyele + MEDU Arts Ensemble Retrospective*, Jacana Press, Johannesburg

4 In: Clive Kellner and Gonzalez, Sergio-Albio (ed/s), 2009. *Thami Mnyele + MEDU Arts Ensemble Retrospective*, Jacana Press, Johannesburg

Indeed, collective practices of creative expression like song and poetry, but also drama and visual art were powerfully present in the historic struggle against apartheid and continue to give voice, courage and comfort in contemporary struggle in South Africa ... and elsewhere too:

“Estonia’s Singing Revolution”

Bessel van der Kolk recounts the following powerful tale in his seminal work on trauma and healing called *The Body Keeps The Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*⁵:

Neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp, who was born in the tiny Baltic country of Estonia, told me the remarkable story of Estonia’s “Singing Revolution”. In June 1987, on one of those endless sub-Arctic summer evenings, more than ten thousand concert goers at the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds linked hands and began to sing patriotic songs that had been forbidden during half a century of Soviet occupation. These songfests and protests continued, and on September 11, 1988, three hundred thousand people, about a quarter of the population of Estonia, gathered to sing and make a public demand for independence. By August 1991 the Congress of Estonia had proclaimed the restoration of the Estonian state, and when Soviet tanks attempted to intervene, people acted as human shields to protect Tallinn’s TV and radio stations. As a columnist noted in the *New York Times* : “Imagine the scene in *Casablanca* in which the French patrons sing ‘La Marseillaise’ in defiance of the Germans, then multiply its power by a factor of thousands, and you’ve only begun to imagine the force of the Singing Revolution”

Two pianists and the COVID pandemic

[Rosey Chan](#) and [Christopher Duigan](#) are both renowned performers, musical collaborators, and pianists – and both had their live touring and shows grind to a halt as a result of the COVID pandemic. As they continued to try and connect their creative output with audiences in this new context, both discovered the healing touch art can bring.

In a [podcast](#) for the Greater Good project, London-based Rosey Chan said of the experience:

“It shifted my writing approach, and suddenly it became much more reflective and meditational, and it was almost like turning a mirror onto myself, you know, just thinking about how I was feeling emotionally. And, a few of my friends, they said to me, you know, I have like teething babies and I’m going a bit stir crazy here now. I’m just, like, stuck at home. So, I was sending music to help my friends and family at the beginning. And I kind of created a mind piano playlist, a private one, just for those people. And they were sending back messages like, can we have some more? It seems to be working. I thought, oh, this is so nice.

I’m glad to know that, because first, the most rewarding thing is I’m able to kind of heal myself & self-medicate through my own playing at home and improvising and just being at the piano and knowing it was also helping my friends and family was the most rewarding feeling possible. And so, it inspired me to write [her new album] *Sonic Apothecary*. ... [I]t’s probably the first time in my life that I recognized and realize that music is a therapy tool.

5 2014, Penguin Books, New York

... Melodies just tap into themes of memory for me and storytelling. Sometimes at the end of a performance, I will do an improvisation and I'll say this is an improvisation based on a love thing that I wrote. And then and I kind of stop myself off because I want to tell them the story. But then I say, "I'm going to let you make up your own story in your head. Because, I love talking to these members of the audience often and finding out how they interpreted it. And there was one woman once and she said to me, "You know, thank you so much for not elaborating on your story, because it gave me the room to kind of," she said, "This is the first time I cried since my mother passed away three months ago."

And my heart, just like the whole like my heart just like, "Oh, my God, I'm so sorry." She goes, "No, you really helped me. That was kind of, I think I needed that, that you kind of healed me in some way. It was the beginning of my mourning process."

And so I realized, the more I play and the more I kind of tap into these things, the more powerful I realized the music can be. And I also realized that it's the responses I get from performing more melody-based pieces generally has a much better response than if I'm playing something that's more rhythmic or beat-driven because I also write electronic music, too. But I always go back to solo piano melody and just simple basics.

What I'm trying to create is a kind of musical pharmacy without sounding too clinical about that."

Christopher Duigan is based in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, and for the past 30 something years, performed on average 100 performances a year – that too, came to a sudden halt as result of COVID restrictions. In Duigan's case, he shifted to exploring sharing live performances from his private home on-line – and for free to those able to access them. It started as a temporary measure but now Duigan intends continuing even when live concerts become possible again.

He says:

"My live concerts have appealed particularly to dedicated music lovers but interestingly the on-line concerts are also providing a service akin to informal music therapy – an hour of company and calm amidst all the uncertainty.

It's not about the music necessarily, but what the music represents. The predictability and structure of music is soothing and reassuring. I read with interest about the musicians that have performed during times of war and crisis, and am beginning to understand better about the restorative and healing role of music" (Illa Thompson, 2021 "Keeping Music Alive").

As usual, we're sharing a couple of pieces to read that we hope you'll find nurturing and interesting:

In "*The Hand Through the Fence*", Maria Popova presents a childhood recollection by poet, Pablo Neruda, that had a life-long impact on him, galvanizing "a precious idea: that all of humanity is somehow together". Popova relates the Neruda's beautiful anecdote to the question of why we make art and enjoy it.

"*The Play Cure*" is also a beautiful and powerful essay that draws on the lifelong work of Susanne Crossman, a "clinical arts therapist, specialising in mental health, and ... a lecturer and consultant using creative techniques". She describes play as an "opening of multitudes" facilitated through its defining features of being purposeless, voluntary and inherently attractive.

The “purposeless” character of art is important – Oscar Wilde famously said “A work of art is useless as a flower is useless”. But as Josh Jones remarks, with all its ambiguities, nonetheless “art can move us beyond the selfish boundaries of the ego to connect with intangibles beyond ideas of use and uselessness”⁶. Crossman reminds us that “when we play, we exist outside of time . . . , outside of clock time. . . . When we play and make art, the products we make, the things we do, are *autotelic* – they are their own end in themselves”. In Heywood’s article mentioned earlier, he concludes on similar terrain, saying: “What is the role of poetry? Perhaps the notion that something must have ‘a role’ is part of the problem. Poetry is to be.”

Crossman quotes Hannah Arendt’s contention that “only where we are confronted with things that exist independently of all utilitarian and functional references . . . do we speak of works of art. In this way, play could be considered as an anti-capitalistic activity”. *The Play Cure* concludes:

In her article ‘Society and Culture’ (1960), Arendt wrote that ‘without the beauty of man-made, worldly things which we call works of art, without the radiant glory in which potential imperishability is made manifest to the world and in the world, all human life would be futile and no greatness could endure’.

Despite all of this, the word ‘creative’ sits uncomfortably in my mouth, with its pop-psychology connections: a corporate jamboree feeding on ‘capitalist realism’, gurus in collarless shirts, hand-holding, sticking hearts onto walls. As a play practitioner, I have deep reservations about formulaic, one-size-fits-all doctrines of play. I see play and making as intimate, personal acts. Their force in changing the individual is their *Locus Solus*. In the 52nd fragment, Heraclitus describes Aion, cosmic time, as a child at play, play as a metaphor for the ever-living cosmic fire *pur aeizoon*, ‘the lightning-bolt which steers all things’. We can and must share imaginary acts, but our imaginations – if they are to empower, overturn and keep us awake at night because we’re creatures who desire – should be allowed to burn with a unique, vibrant light.

6 Josh Jones, 22 June 2021. “David Bowie on Why It’s Crazy to Make Art – and We Do It Anyway” at: <https://www.openculture.com/2021/06/david-bowie-on-why-its-crazy-to-make-art-and-we-do-it-anyway-1998.html>