

An Artists Enemy: Explorations into the End of Artmaking

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Abstract

Art has never been a simple thing to do for many people. This paper will touch on the difficulties that people face when making art, and the many reasons that make people stop. Fear of being judged is a very normal human feeling, but it has constantly stopped people from realizing their potential. There was a time when, as children or adolescents we would make things and show them off proudly. We lost that innocence as we began to grown up and this is a very crucial part of why as adults, we let our fear get in the way of making art.

For many, art is a series of pieces created by people who have mastered their medium. Art is Chopin, Van Gogh, or Michelangelo. For this reason, many people who begin making art do not finish. We make the same mistakes and stop in the same place. We are ashamed of the things we produce because comparatively they are not good art. So questions arise: What makes good art? Or more specifically, what makes bad art? And why do people often stop making art?

There is a common assumption in art that states that only those with talent can be artists. In their book *Art & Fear*, David Bayles and Ted Orland write about this common misconception. They state that "...art rests fundamentally upon talent, and that talent is a gift randomly built into some people and not into others. In common parlance, either you have it or you don't – great art is a product of genius, good art a product of near-genius" (Bayles, Orland, 2). They argue that this view is strictly fatalistic. Art has never been limited to those who have been given the gift of talent, nor is it only for those who never live long enough to see themselves become famous. These people who spend their entire lives not getting anything recognized are seen as failures in the eyes of the normal person; even if their artwork becomes popular and/or famous after their death. It is a natural reaction in the everyday person to see something and believe that it is worthless. This not only applies to art but everything that has ever existed that was created by man.

It is true that some art is better than others. After all, not very often do we hear of artists such as Leonardo da Vinci. True geniuses may only come around every century or so, but even they had to inevitably face discontent with their art. No artist starts off perfect; it takes decades of practice to achieve what people like Van Gogh achieved. No matter what, art is only art in the eyes of the beholder. A creation made by an artist can be seen as a masterpiece by some, but to the artist it was a waste of time. All too many times does an artist tuck away their work or scrap

it because of the way the product turned out. Rejection is something that every artist, both new-coming and recurrent, face throughout their entire career, some to the point that they become discontent with their own art styles.

That being said, Humans have made art since long before we knew we were making art. The people who painted bison on cave walls did not know that future generations would look at and study those paintings. Art has always been made by ordinary people, the reasons for making art, although significant, play no role in whether or not a piece should be considered art. In truth, art has always been made by people who have flaws and insecurities. So one would have to accept that the ideal artist is also an ordinary person. One who made mistakes and, rather than quit because it was not good, learned about themselves and got better. This is where a lot of people quit their journey through their artistic talent. They make just a few mistakes and then proceed to drop the creation they had sitting in front of them because they feel like a failure in the work that they had done.

Art is a back and forth between the piece and the creator. It is a conversation, just as one would have with another person. An individual must speak and listen in order to have a successful conversation. Just as with art, the artist must make and evaluate in order for a piece to be successful. Becoming an artist means learning to accept oneself and making the artist's work their own by allowing themselves to make art that is a representation of who they are. Even failed pieces are essential in an artist's success as it is not a measure of wealth or a limited amount of mistakes made but rather how much one learned about themselves. This is what art is. Trial and error, a conversation, an experience that teaches a person things they never knew about themselves.

Often times an artist goes into making a piece and halfway through, it becomes something completely different from what the artist had imagined it to be. This results in a change, not of opinion, but of form. Instead of the piece being controlled by the artist, the artist becomes controlled by their creativity. A huge fear of any artist is that a piece will come out distorted; often times though, the distorted piece is better than the original would have been.

“Often the work we have not done seems more real in our minds than the pieces we have completed” (Bayles, Orland, 1). The process of making art is the most important part to no one else but the maker. The audience does not see how much time was spent on the piece, they do not see where mistakes were painted over, and they have no reason to care. They do not see the technique or passion that went into making the art. These factors are fundamental in only the artists’ development. There is an eternal somewhat vicious cycle within the artist at all times. Many artists constantly wonder whether or not they are good enough. There is a point in many artist careers when “vision races ahead of execution” (Bayles, Orland, 14). An artist will almost always imagine for themselves something that they cannot achieve. Their visions can race ahead of the abilities that they currently possess. This happens to every single artist, no matter how small or grand their pieces are. An artist will always envision something that is greater than what their current level of skill will allow them to complete. Because of this, artists see themselves as product of their failures instead of their experiences. No matter how good the piece that they create is, what they wanted to create will always be better in their minds. This is the struggle that all artists contain within them.

The struggle, however, is half the work. If an artist were to stop making a piece in the same place over and over because it was not satisfactory then the artist has learned nothing but how to quit. In order for a person to learn from their mistakes they must practice. Without

practice, these artists that desperately want to be good enough to appease the masses will never be more than paupers in the art world; begging for someone to notice them. Without practice these artists will never accomplish anything; and that is the biggest fear any artist could ever face.

It is said that craftsmanship is very important in art. It shows technique and expertise in any chosen medium. Sometimes is it this importance placed on craftsmanship that paralyzes many artists. There are those however, who argue that it is the least important thing, “The real question is not “Is my craftsmanship good enough?” It is “What do I want my work to be?” (Larsen, 52). Craftsmanship in itself is actually quite useless, it has “no critical value”, in reality, if one focuses only on the craftsmanship of an object, it can inhibit their progress as a creative artist. However, many artists are afraid to stray away from craftsmanship and technique, because anything else will not guarantee success within the piece.

Fear is a dangerous thing. It instills expectations and assumptions about what an artist should do. Fear causes so many people to stop making art. We compare ourselves to other artists and it makes us realize we are not as good as we want to be. We do not express ourselves the way we want because we know we will be judged for it. We do not show other people our art because we do not like to show vulnerability. Lady Bird Johnson said “Art is the window to man's soul. Without it, he would never be able to see beyond his immediate world; nor could the world see the man within” (qtd. in “Art Perspective”). This quote can perfectly describe how artists view the world. Until a person can see the big picture within their artistic abilities, they will never be able to show themselves to the world.

“Fear about artmaking fall into two families: fears about yourself, and fears about your reception by others. In a general way, fears about yourself prevent you from doing your *best*

work, while fears about your reception by others prevents you from doing your *own* work.”

(Bayles, Orland, 23). We often suppress who we are or what we want our art to represent due to fear of rejection. We make what people expect or what we know people will like, and although this may lead to more praise, it is not as meaningful if we do not produce our own work. Artists still create pieces on the side that have true meaning to them, whether it be something plain and simple that gets back to the basics or something complex like a painting that details dozens of colors. Some of these pieces will never see the light of day; whether they are hidden away in the secrets of families or the piece is not able to be recognized as the painters’.

In addition, many people fear that if they do not produce work that is good, then they are not a true artist. “Fear that you are not an artist causes you to undervalue your work” (Bayles, Orland, 24). As stated, art is a representation of who people are. If they think that their art is not good, then the likelihood that that is true will increase. People tend to start losing hope when it comes to things like creation. When an artist makes something with their own two hands, and it comes out horribly disfigured or maimed, they lose some of the desire to continue working on any projects at all. Many times throughout an artist’s career they will decide that art is preposterous because they cannot satisfy everyone. Artists who try to do this though, end up satisfying no one because they try to conform to the norms of society and culture.

“The adventures, difficulties, and even suffering inherent in growing up can serve to develop or educe our original voice, but more often they bury it” (Nachmanovitch, 116). As children, we used to have the ability to draw whatever we wanted because we knew no fear. There was no error in drawing the sun at the corner of the page with a smile on its face, something that to many experienced artists is taboo. Now we fear our capacities and limits. The limits of our hands and of our imagination. As Bayles and Orland put it, it is the “fear that your

fate is in your own hands, but that your hands are weak” (Bayles, Orland, 3). As a child, one does not fear that the hands are weak, nor do they fear that fate is in the hands. All a child fears is losing his innocence, something that happens as a result of the way a child is brought up.

Parents, friends, and education always have an impact on people, especially during their youth. When children are young, they tend to see the good in people and things. Their innocence is a marvelous thing that many adults envy. As a child it is easy to make mistakes because there are never any consequences. However, as a child begins to age they learn the ‘correct’ way of doing things; to color inside the lines. Their imaginations are tamed and tested, and they learn fear in self-expression. That being said, this is where the schools are to blame. Schools are supposed to be the ones that teach these kids how to curb their imaginations; not completely destroy them.

As art changes, there will always be some disapproval from older generations, Andy Rooney stated “I don’t like most of the stuff passing for art, and it’s everywhere” (“When Did This Become Art?”). Of course, there will always be some form of disapproval for incoming and outgoing styles of art, but it becomes complicated when the general public begins to take art lightly because they believe it is not good. Schools have lost funding for art classes in several states and have stopped placing importance for art classes (Torres, “Arts education in all schools needs to be a priority and better funded”). However, in a lot of cases, even if a school does teach a child about art, it does not always have the best outcome.

“Schools can nurture creativity in children, but they can also destroy it, and all too often do” (Nachmanovitch, 116). In his book *Free Play*, Nachmanovitch emphasizes his discontent with the way that children are taught art in school. He wrote of a child who “drew extraordinarily vibrant, imaginative trees...by the age of six, this child had gone through a year of first grade

and had begun drawing lollipop trees just like the other kids. Lollipop trees consist of a single blob of green, representing the general mass of leaves with details obliterated, stuck up on top of a brown stick” (115). We have a tendency to take children’s intricate knowledge and imagination and replace it with a simplistic knowledge to make them more predictable members of society. This predictability makes it difficult for a child to want to stand out for fear of judgment and rejection.

In their later age, people begin to learn about proportions, shading, techniques, and depth. The rights from the wrongs in art making. Emphasis is placed in how realistic things are, where the light comes from and where the shadows should be. We learn about Van Gogh, Michelangelo, Da Vinci, Salvador Dali, and their most famous works. But we never learn who was not an artist of their time, who did not gain success, who felt like giving up, and who challenged norms. We never learn bravery in art. This brings up a very valid point when it comes to how we are as a race. Out of all of the people that have ever decided to try and make something artistic, we only know a handful of them. In the past century, a person could count on their fingers how many well-known artists have been born, yet thousands upon thousands of people have attempted to make something and not been recognized as someone who was important to the history of art.

For my research, I wanted to interview a set of people and ask them a series of questions to verify whether or not they make art and why. My interviews consisted of five questions, with my fourth and fifth question dependent on what the answer for the third questions was.

1. What is your definition of art?
2. Have you ever made art?
3. Do you still make art?

4. Why did you stop?
5. Why didn't you stop?
6. What makes art bad?

In my findings, most of the people I interviewed did not consider themselves artists. They stopped making art because they feared they were not good enough to continue. They compared themselves to others and although they were sometimes fueled by other artists, they ultimately realized the limits of their potential and gave up on themselves. This goes back to the topic previously discussed where “vision races ahead of execution”. These people that were interviewed tried to make themselves too big too quick and as a result they received nothing but a heavy heart as they tried to meet these visions and failed.

Those who did not stop making art had a more positive outlook on themselves and art in general. When asked to define art in their own words, the general idea was that art is a freedom of expression. It is, to them, something that represents either the artist, or something that the artist cares about and wants to share with others. These are the people that understand that practice is the only way to get better when it comes to making pieces of art, no matter what media they are using. They could make the same pieces over and over again until they were perfect, but in the end the only thing that they are “perfect” in is the singular technique. No two separate pieces of art are going to be the same, whether in technique or in style. These people understand and accept that art is freedom.

One of the main reasons that people had stopped making art is because they had been told that they were not good enough, and this idea lingered throughout their life as artists until they ultimately decided to give in and stop. The biggest problem with this is that when I asked them *exactly* why they were told they were not good enough, they could not tell me. The general ideas

were that they simply were not good enough. The second problem I faced when talking to people about why they stopped were the people who caused them to stop. This is the most common problem that anyone faces when it comes to art. As stated before, the vast majority of artists give up on art because they are either told that the art they are making is bad, or they convince themselves that the art they are making is bad. People who stopped making art had no argument against the fear that they had created against themselves.

I asked who in their life made them feel like their art was not worthy of being called art. The answers, surprisingly enough, were the people closest to them: teachers, parents, and friends. The people they depended on were the ones to make them feel like they were not good enough. In reality, this is not a cruel act as is it not done to hurt the artist. The people I interviewed did not have any malicious or negative feelings about art. In fact, their opinion on art was a much higher one than it should have been. And it seems their friends and family felt the same way. I believe this is because even though these people have tried to create art and either failed due to the self-image they had already set up or failed because they did not meet the specifications they wanted to meet, they still recognize the amount of time that goes into making a piece. These people have a certain respect for artists that dedicate their entire lives to making pieces of art because they realize just how much work goes into making just a single piece. This respect can only be given to a person by someone that has gone through the struggles of making a piece of art.

In the interviews I performed, I had one person stand out in particular. This person outwardly expressed their fear when making art and admitted that even when people express their approval of the art made, this person still fears that, inwardly people ridicule their art. Although this thought process is not surprising, it was unique to me in that this was the only

person who showed strength in not allowing their fear of others' opinions stop them. All others had simply given up on themselves.

As an artist, I have faced a lot of discontent with my art and plenty of judgment from several people. I have been told that my art is not good, and I have felt like giving up numerous times. However, I believe it is extremely important not only to not give up on art, but to not give up on oneself. I have never believed that thinking one is not good enough is any reason to stop making art. Art is an enjoyable thing to do, however, it also requires a lot of practice. There is no sense in undervaluing oneself in something that should be fun. There is already so much stress and pressure placed in the daily struggles in life, and where fun can be had, it should.

I believe that art can be a perfect stabilizer if looked at in a more positive way than people tend to. When people stop making art, they seem to lose hope in themselves and in their skills and abilities. However, I believe that the most important thing to remember is that people are not and have never been limited to anything.

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