

Christine Morvillo
Department of Anthropology
University of San Diego

The Creative Mind at the Mercy of Society

With the evolution of human beings came a complex brain system that has allowed us to develop beyond all other animals. The human brain's capacity to reason has allowed us to manipulate our environment. This manipulation has given rise to societal developments not experienced by any other creature. At the root of this human intellect is the ability to create. Through imagination and creativity humankind has cured diseases, flown to the moon, and built weapons of mass destruction. The wonder that is the human brain has not been fully explained and its capabilities are far from understood.

A major aspect of humankind's unique ability to create is the drive to produce artistic works. The human species is unique in its capability and desire to create 'art'. We know that art dates back to the beginnings of humanity: a small statue found in lower Austria dated approximately 30,000 B.C. (Le. 'Venus of Willendorf') is a valid example (Hartt 1989:34). While each human has the capacity to make art, few seem to have the special gift for creating truly outstanding works. The Van Goghs, Mozarts, Plaths, Hemingways, O'Neills, Pollocks, and many more stand apart in a world of visions and thoughts not experienced by the average person. It is tragic to learn that for many of these great artists their world of unique vision causes much torment and pain. The unique processes of the artistic mind, not fully understood by science, place them apart from society in private tortuous worlds that may end in disaster, even death.

Kay Redfield Jamison commented that "All you have to do is go down a list of poets, writers, and other artists" and you will find a history of institutionalization and suicides" (Raymond 1989:A6). At a quick glance one would conclude that uniquely creative persons are driven by some sort of psychosis. But this is certainly not the case when observing artists in traditional societies. Likewise, many modern creative and established artists do not suffer from psychological problems. While the lifestyles of many artists are peculiar, it can not be said that their 'craziness' is synonymous with creative genius. It can then be asked, why are many creative geniuses of our Western culture hobbled with a mental inability to cope with their lives. The answer to this question is to be found in the human society. The social surroundings of creative persons play a role in determining how they will be able to cope with their mental gift. By examining the society of a traditional artist as compared to that of a Western artist, it will become apparent that both societies impact the mental health of the individuals who are especially creative or unique.

Art as expressed in traditional societies can be categorized as 'functional'. The art found in association with traditional cultures originally served a domestic and ritual purpose. While songs, drawings, pottery, sculptures, metallurgy, and weapons were creative expressions that served a significant function for the community, there is a dominant religious component. An example of this would be the Tiwi culture that has existed in Northern Australia for thousands of years. Senior Tiwi men spend their time manufacturing ceremonial spears, graveposts, and composing songs and dances (Hart 1988:51). These pieces of art are then used in annual ceremonies. Creativity is employed to honor the spirit world and is a task reserved for senior males who have earned the leisure time to invest in this important endeavor.

Another example of a culture that integrated religion with art is the ancient Moche of the last centuries B.C. on the north coast of Peru. Christopher Donnan suggests that the many scenes represented in Moche art represent the spiritual aspects of the culture. Elaborately dressed figures and anthropomorphic figures indicate that the scenes in which they are depicted are spiritual in nature. Likewise, many other art pieces that seem to represent daily activities, prove ultimately to have religious meaning. Donnan, in Moche Art of Peru, writes:

...certain depictions, which appear to illustrate secular or daily occurrences, may in fact be pieces of a symbolic system which expresses only the supernatural and ceremonial aspects of this ancient culture. [1978: 174]

The artists who produced these works were craftsmen whose job it was to make pottery and textiles used in the society. As in today's society the level of artistic talent differed from artist to artist. In the same volume, Donnan explains:

...Our ability to recognize the work of certain artists suggest that the Moche people also were able to identify the work of specific individuals. Perhaps there were certain artists whose work was highly revered, and who had considerable influence over their contemporaries, as well as the artists of subsequent generations. [1978: 50]

Donnan further notes that although they worked "within the standard canons of Moche art, [the artists] enjoyed some idiosyncratic variation" (1978:174).

All the artists of Moche society had a special talent in the creation of art and served a function within the community. What they produced focused on the religious aspect of their lives, something that was so integrated it would have been difficult for the Moche people to draw a line between secular and non-secular (Donnan 1978:50). These remarkable artists were supported in their endeavors by

the structure of their society. The continuation of all art was promoted and regarded as distinguished.

In both the Tiwi and Moche cultures, art served an important function in the daily lives of the community. Life's activities would have been seriously compromised if no one had manufactured pottery, textiles, or ceremonial tools. For this reason artists had a significant place within society, as well as a focus for their own existence. This focus was the creation of domestic/religious artifacts. In modern society this is no longer the focus of an artist's self-expression.

In traditional society there is another strong figure whose creativity and mental gifts play a special role within the community. This person would be the shaman, or traditional healer. These individuals are 'chosen' by the gods to work as religious mediators, keepers of ritual, healers, and protectors of the group. Mircea Eliade, in Shamanism, explains the role of the shaman:

...it is the shamans who, by their trances, cure them [tribal members], accompany their dead to the "Realm of Shades," and serve as mediators between them and their gods, celestial or infernal, greater or lesser. This small mystical elite not only directs the community's religious life but, as it were, guards its "soul." The shaman is the great specialist in the human soul; he alone "sees" it, for he knows its "form and its destiny. [1964:8]

These religious mediators are strikingly unique within their community. Their behavior and mental frame of mind is unlike that of other members of their community. They see things others do not, they hear things that others do not, and they think things others do not. Their mental state may be comparable to the mental states of exceptionally creative persons in the modern world.

Shamans are usually people who are 'different' or seemingly 'chosen'. This could include persons with epilepsy or other similar afflictions. Others may feel

themselves chosen by what they see in a dream or during illness. Social conditioning tells these individuals that if they experience unique visions and thoughts it is the gods who are speaking to or through them. In response they become shamans and fulfill their calling. And finally, they can be chosen through lineage. Mircea Eliade , in Shamanism, explains:

...While still a child, the future shaman,...proves to be sickly, withdrawn, contemplative. But his father gives him a lengthy preparation, teaching him the tribe's song and traditions. When a young man in a family is subject to epileptic attacks, the Altaians are convinced that one of his ancestors was a shaman. [1964:20]

Society supports and conditions these individuals unique mental experiences. The society offers explanations for the experiences as well as a purpose for the Shaman's creative energies. In this way mental stability is maintained whereas in the modern world such behavior would be deemed evidence of mental instability.

As society develops and 'advances', such creative and mentally unique individuals begin to lose their elevated social roles. Sociologists have noted that as society-moves from traditional to modern, life becomes increasingly secular. During the eighteenth century philosophers of the Enlightenment began to develop a rift between the traditional and the modern approaches to religion. Bernard J. Cooke writes, "A basic split between traditional and modern approaches to religion became evident and increased until well into the twentieth century" (1990:217). This was a time of revolution and change, when people abolished the aristocracies and the rule of the Church, and sought the freedoms of the republics ruled by democracy.

In art this period is called Neoclassicism. Artists began to move away from the heavily religious themes expressed throughout the Gothic and Renaissance periods in Europe, and Neoclassicism focused on revolutions, war heros, and the

republic. Although this period of transition was not completely without some religious influence, as some painters honored their subjects with religious overtones, secularism had been put into motion. The freedoms of democracy and the break from the dominance of religion spurred artists to explore other realms of expression.

American art never saw a clear religious period, because American settlers were rebelling from aristocracy and the Church, and the country sought a secular democratic state. The work of colonial American artists was functional. Much like that of the traditional artist, their art was often decorative in nature. During the colonial years of America a portrait was not an aesthetic piece, but rather a record of an individual and his or her belongings. Furniture and domestic wares were also carefully decorated. This pragmatism put forth the question of an objects purpose. Art at this point still had a distinct purpose within the community, and the artist still had a purpose and place within society.

As modernization and industrialization moved forward, artists began an exploration of themselves and the world around them. Art no longer needed a purpose, artists were free to simply explore and recreate what they saw and felt. Matthew-Baigell points out that "[Robert Henri) became convinced at that time that art should remain a matter of personal exploration rather than of formal manipulation" (1984:196). The nineteenth century became filled with paintings unlike anything ever created before. The scope of techniques and genres exploded during this period. Imagists, luminists, impressionists, and realists brought the world a completely new visual experience.

With such diversity and lack of function, art came to be carefully and sometimes painfully scrutinized. Artists were even ostracized and shut out of art academies because of their work. Independent exhibits became the outlet for artists who were forced to "bypass the academies, which were no longer willing or able to

adjust to the new forces in the art world" (Baigell 1984:193). The life of an artist and his work had left the realm of religion just as society had. Art was no longer revered as sacred, it no longer served a distinct function or a purpose. Art had become purely aesthetic, to be judged subjectively, and the artist became the victim of those subjective values. The artist began to sit outside of society and wait to be let in, rather than holding a productive and respected place within the community. And as this artist sat outside and waited, he became susceptible to the complexities of his creative, gifted mind.

It is assumed that exceptionally creative people have brain activity somewhat different from the average person. This different brain activity allows for a different mode of thought and vision; it is what allowed Mozart to write symphonies in one draft and what allowed Einstein to develop the theory of relativity. Albert Rothenberg identifies two thought processes involved in creativity: the janusian process and homospatial process (1990).

During the janusian process the individual conceives "multiple opposites or antitheses [simultaneously], either as existing side by side or as equally operative, valid, on:ue" (Rothenberg 1990:15). The individual perceives opposites as logically coexisting simultaneously. Rothenberg explains that this process allows the individual to leap past the bounds of logic and is "at the heart of the most striking creative breakthroughs" (1990:15).

Rothenberg offers some examples of the creative outcome of the janusian process. Novelist Robert Penn Warren described to Rothenberg that while exercising, he thought of a series of poetic lines. The last word of each line became the first word of the next line, "... a juxtaposition that sets one word to opposite functions, both ending and beginning a poetic thought" (Rothenberg 1990:17). Rothenberg also notes the janusian process in Pablo Picasso's mural Guernica: "The completed

mural, portrays human carnage both inside a room and outside at the same time..." {1990:9}, with the source of light being both the sun and a light bulb at once. An example of this process in science is indicated by Einstein's ability to perceive that as a person falls that person has no gravitational field, so in theory that person is "both in motion and at rest at the same time" {Rothenberg 1990:15}.

. The second type of thought process identified with creativity is the homospatial process. "The homospatial process consists of conceiving two or more discrete entities occupying the same space, a conception leading to the articulation of new identities" (Rothenberg 1990:25). The process can be stimulated by "Rhythmic connections, verbal overtones and associations, emotional relationships, aesthetic feeling, and conceptual formulations" (Rothenberg 1990:27), and is an extension of the thoughts derived from the janusian process. The artist will visualize separate entities superimposed on one another, and this vision gives rise to the creative structure of ideas, poetry, paintings, stories, etc.

Examples of the outcome of this process can be metaphors used in poetry. Rothenberg cites the metaphor "tarantula rays of the lamp spread across the conference room" (1990:26). Rothenberg writes, "He actively superimposed images of the spider and a light source together, along with images of the letters in the words because he wanted to create a metaphor of both together" (1990:26). A second example is seen in Marc Chagall's painting Le Saint Voiturier. In this painting "... two distinct bodies are perfectly integrated into a single form that appears to be both falling and at rest" (Rothenberg 1990:29). like the janusian process the homospatial process brings together ideas that, without this process, would seem disassociated. The janusian and homospatial processes allow the mind to transcend boundaries of common thought and bring seemingly unrelated things together to create new artistic thoughts and visions.

Rothenberg's findings surrounding the janusian and homospatial processes evolved from over 2,000 hours of interviewing prize winning artists and scientists, exploring the creative processes of their work in progress at the time of the research. In addition to the intensive interviews Rothenberg carried out controlled psychological experiments consisting "... of special tasks designated to identify characteristic thinking processes" (1990:10).

Through Rothenberg's research, he has concluded that the conceptual processes used in creation are not related to pathological motivations (1990:12). These processes can only be accessed by a healthy mind. If a person were suffering from a psychological disorder he would only be able to engage in these mental processes if he stepped out of his psychosis:

..., although creative people may be psychotic at various periods of their lives,...,they cannot be psychotic at the time they are engaged in a creative process, or it will not be successful. Homospatial and janusian processes are healthy ones. [Rothenberg 1990:36]

But even though these processes are healthy they causes mental strain and are difficult to utilize. This strain is limited, occurring only during creative activities and not during uncreative activities (Rothenberg 1990:36). Unfortunately, emotional strain from these processes is not always confined to the creative activities and mayspill over into other activities and interpersonal relationships, and the tension associated with creative thinking may directly and indirectly affect them" (Rothenberg 1990:36). For this reason creative people may appear eccentric and bizarre in their behaviors.

The strains incurred by the use of the janusian and homospatial processes, as part of the creative process, create a risk for some artists. The level of strain can transcend into mental illness. But which artists are most likely to cross over

the boundary and why? The answer may not be found within the chemical makeup of the brain, but outside in the social environment of the artist. It is possible that the artist's environment will play a decisive role in his ability to control his emotional state and prevent or instigate the onset of mental illness.

The social environment of the traditional artist was religiously based with strong community support for the artist's endeavors. Traditional art pieces had purpose since they were needed in the intertwined domestic and religious life of the society. Craftsmen and shamans occupied a functional place within their society and their work carried deep meaning. The secularism that has occurred as society has modernized turned traditional artistic endeavors into 'art', and the artist lost his functional place within society.

In Western classrooms children are scolded for drawing (doodling), daydreaming,--in other words--creating. In Western homes parents push their children towards business degrees rather than the pursuit of art. Western society tends to stereotype artists as 'oddballs' and 'hippies' because they are non-conformists. Our society is structured around a delicate balance of 'normal' conduct, and artistic individuals often question these norms as they exercise their creativity; their individualistic creative ideas are threatening to the conservative, conformist nature of society. Beyond the mental strain that these artists undergo through the creative process, they also face society's judgmental attitudes concerning what is art, and are often pushed outside society to be left alone with their thoughts and visions.

A sad example of this is William Kurelek. Kurelek was a Canadian landscape artist of the 1960's who grew up in Sonewall, Manitoba on his father's dairy farm. Kurelek's imaginative and creative nature was not appreciated by his strict father. Joan Murray writes that Kurelek's father thought that his son was weak, "'not like

the other kids.' 'Wake up and be a boy', Kurelek recalled his father saying one night as he went to sleep. 'Don't be a girl.'" (1983:10). While he feared his father, he also admired the man's ability to tell stories and hoped to one day be a master story teller like his father, but in high school he realized "that no one wanted to hear what he had to say" (Murray 1983:10). The pain and disappointment of his young life was translated into his artwork which vividly and gruesomely communicated the pain in his heart and mind. Critics referred to his work as "'somber', 'menacing', 'grotesque', and 'macabre'" (Murray 1983:9).

Kurelek's social environment created a nervous, shy, hesitant, yet honest individual who sought approval in a world where he was a misfit (Murray 1983:6). Searching endlessly in an attempt to fill his void he found himself in England during the mid-1950s. It was there that he had a breakdown that placed him in a mental institution. During this period he still painted and even titled one work Help Me Please Help Me Please Help Me-Please Help. It was while he was in the English mental institution that Kurelek received shock therapy which led him toward a "redeeming and transforming conversion to Roman Catholicism" (Murray 1983:9).

Kurelek described this transformation during an interview that appeared in the film The Maze. He describes the shock therapy as "Fourteen treatments in all ... like being executed fourteen times over" (Murray 1983:9), and as he gazed around the room during his 'executions' he saw other patients waiting their turn . He noticed that they all had their hands clasped as if they were praying, and Kurelek, who was never very religious, began to pray. It was at this moment that he 'knew' that God had allowed his mental anguish so that he, Kurelek, would be better able to represent the pain that Christ experienced during the crucifixion.

From that point on Kurelek became a very devout Catholic and "believed that his ability to make art was literally a gift from God, and must be used in God's

services" (Murray 1983:9). His creative gifts had been given meaning and focus and he used religion to fill his void and ease his pain. Kurelek was able to stabilize his life, was married, had a family, continued painting the Canadian landscape and began writing children's stories. Religion became a temporary source of this stability, but ultimately he was unable to control his mental world and successfully committed suicide in 1977.

Peter I. Berger writes about anomy and nomos and religions role in those two states. Nomos is "a meaningful order [that] is imposed upon the direct experiences and meaning of individuals" (Berger 1967:19). The opposite of nomos is anomy, a "radical separation from the social world" and constitutes a threat to the individual living in this state" (Berger, 1967:21). Berger writes, "To be separated from society exposes the individual to a multiplicity of dangers with which he is unable to cope by himself, in the extreme case to the danger of imminent extinction" (1967:22). For Berger, religion provides a sanctuary from anomy and helps to hold individuals in nomos. like many artists Kurelek was separated from society due to his creative mental 'gifts'. Driven to self destruction, he found a temporary shield from anomy in the Catholic Religion.

Another artist who was able to secure his social environment and control the destructive strain of creative thought was Andy Warhol. Warhol had a nervous condition as a child and his mother kept him busy with sketching. He studied art in college and became a commercial artist in New York after graduation. Warhol was an intense observer of people and the life outside himself. In his art he recreated objects that were familiar. The Coke bottle, soup can, ketchup bottle, cereal box, Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley were all common images of the commercial world of the 1960's.

Warhol, like Kurelek, was shy, simple, honest, and oriented towards approval. Both also evidenced a violent orientation in their art. Warhol expressed this in his 'death and disaster' series of paintings and later in his films. But, unlike Kurelek, Warhol never was pushed to the brink of destruction by his creative mind. He was able to escape what Kurelek was only able to delay. The explanation for this may have much to do with Warhol's environment.

As a child, Warhol's creativity was supported and encouraged as therapy for his nervous condition. As an adult Warhol submerged himself within a group of people that supported his work and his ideas. They lived and worked together, all creating and supporting the ideas that were being born in his studio 'The Factory'. While Warhol's creativity could have driven him outside of society's nomos, he manufactured a nurturing society around his nomos, and never experienced exposure to long periods of anomy.

Rather than using religion, Warhol was able to shield himself from 'madness' by creating a sub-culture within society, one where his thoughts and visions had support, focus, and meaning. However, Warhol was not the first artist to submerge himself. In this manner, to create support in a world that was unable to give it. At the end of the 19th century Robert Henri's 'The Eight', a group of painters, bonded together against society at large which was very critical of their work. The realism of 'The Eight' was an expression of the life that they saw around them. Trash cans, smoke stacks, and poverty were the subjects of their work, in fact, they were nicknamed the 'Ash-can School'.

The mental torment and final destruction of such artists as William Kurelek, Silvia Plath, Ernest Hemingway, Eugene O'Neill, Jackson Pollock, and many others, is a tragic loss for our society. While it is easy to point to the brain and say they were simply mentally unstable people and their demise was an inevitable meltdown,

or ordained by God, we may be ignoring the role society plays in their painful lives. Artistic creativity is one of the most remarkable of human activities, but our society, instead of allowing it to invoke passion, suppresses it. It is possible that the values of our society may have caused more destruction of human creativity -- even genius -- than it has generated.

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