The Sorrows of Young Werther

Goethe once said, "Romanticism is a disease, classicism is health". The central character in Goethe's epistolary novel, The Sorrows of Young Werther has come to symbolise the hypersensitive artist. Werther is the symptomatic romantic; he demonstrates disease. Based partly on Goethe's unrequited love for Charlott Buff, Werther's letters expose a tortured soul who, racked by unfulfilled love, reduced to despair and, finally, unable to live with his pain, destroys himself. Werther is one of the earliest literary cult figures. Following the publication of the novel, which was shamelessly exploited by the book trade, dozens of young men, dressed in Werther's signature "blue frock-coat and buff leather waist-coat and breeches" (Hulse, 1989: 9) took the knife to themselves, in emulation of their hero, and died with an open copy in their limp hands. Werther's pain is inextricably tied to his passion and his pleasure. It is always translated through his longing, not only for the woman by whom he is obsessed, but also for the unattainable sublime. In his autobiography Goethe wrote of this sweet pain:

If, as they say, the greatest happiness is to be found in longing, and if true longing must always be directed to something unattainable, then everything conspired to make the youth whose fortunes we are following (speaking of himself in the third person) the happiest mortal on earth (cited in Hulse, 1989:7).

In the tradition of courtly love, Werther's passion is a sickness which both frustrates and fuels his art. His pain is exquisite. His longing is the source of both wretchedness and joy:

What a thing is Man, this lauded demi-god! Does he not lack the very powers he has most need of? And if he should soar in joy, or sink in sorrow, is he not halted and returned to his cold, dull consciousness at the very
moment he was longing to be lost in the vastness of infinity? (Hulse’ translation of Goethe, 1989:105)

Werther’s romantic ‘sorrow’ has been replaced in later generations by existential angst and post-modern alienation: pain, pain and more pain. Through these traditions the association of art and pain has become embedded in Western culture and not only in the realms of high art or Wildean “art for art’s sake”. Popular television soaps and women’s magazines have recognised the seductive appeal of romanticised pain or trauma, and commodified it. Today it is not only artists and their creations that bravely and publicly suffer. Now the domestic tragedies, diseases and tragic malfunctions of everyday mums and dads, made public, vie with high art to move us to engage with the nobility of human suffering. Romanticism has become sentiment; the philosophy is Buttrose rather than Kant.

The trend towards ‘arts intervention’ programs

This association between public pain and art or culture has taken an interesting turn suggesting that the catharsis experienced through seeing or reading about pain as imagined by artists, can also be experienced when art is applied, as it were, to real life pain experienced by ordinary people. There is a necessary connection here between a cathartic response to pain expressed or imagined through art and the therapeutic use of art to assuage real pain – or what seems to be pain. The corollary is that not only can art assuage pain, maybe even something resembling art can. As a consequence, arts intervention programs for marginalised people or those in marginalised communities are being implemented widely. Griffith University now uses the term Applied Theatre for both an academic program and a research center, both of which focus in part on this area. This use of ‘arts engagement’ to cure or save extends beyond individuals to communities. In the past few years there has been exponential growth in arts-led community recovery through the pursuit of what is now described as "wellness" or empowerment.

While it is not easy to find money for community arts projects, it would seem this area is an exception. It is also an increasingly popular research area and a potential source of research funding. There are extensive findings, often anecdotal, coming out of North America through various publications, including Champions of Change (Fiske, 1999) and the Rand Report: The Arts and Pro-social Impact Study (McArthur et al, 1996). Here in Australia we have become similarly convinced of the efficacy of the arts as social intervention. In the last year I have marked three theses on related topics, two of which include the word empowerment in the title, and I currently have three research higher degree students working in the area. The Centre for Popular Education at the University of Technology in Sydney, under the leadership of Rick Flowers, has compiled an extensive list of projects in Australia. Looking across them it would seem that the arts are the panacea for all pain. There are now several conferences each year on this and related issues. More interestingly this area of enquiry has engaged not only community artists and teachers, but also a gamut of health, legal and social welfare professionals, community-minded businessmen and public sporting heroes. A special one-day conference entitled Taking A Risk: The Art of Re-engaging Young People was held in Melbourne in November last year and brought together "young people at risk, youth workers and organisations, Australian and international members of the judiciary from the youth and family courts, and community arts workers"
Community arts have become a significant part of the health and welfare agenda. The issues being addressed through the arts include mental health, substances, sexuality, peer and family relationships, rural isolation, cultural marginalisation, and transition, social renewal or growth. Very often the participants’ own stories, inevitably tragic, are the starting point for their art.

What are the kinds of projects being addressed?

- In Shepparton (in Victoria) Cutting Edge Youth Services works with new settlers, focusing on community integration and identification. A recent report by the Fairley Foundation has identified the potential for a youth led cultural renewal of the town (Carter, 2002). At the recent launch of this project a group of young people told and enacted their stories.
- In inner-city Melbourne the Big H’Art project recently completed a youth arts program with the City Council, and on the edge of the city center Jesuit Youth Services regularly works with young people on a drop-in basis.
- In Bendigo, a country town north of Melbourne, a group of highly marginalised young people works with youth services providers on writing and recording their own music in the project Real to Reel
- Somebody’s Daughter, a Melbourne-based performance group, works with young women in detention centres.
- In the Western suburbs of Melbourne SCRAYP Youth Arts with an Edge is operating a mentor arts program through which young artists are trained to work in secondary schools.
- Reach is another project using drama in schools to work through issues of identity and relationship.

‘Risky Business’: an ARC research project

Two colleagues and I are currently working on a large Australian Research Council research project with Juvenile Justice Centres, the Department of Justice, Arts Victoria (the State government’s arts funding arm) and VicHealth (the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation). The project involves a cross-disciplinary investigation of creative arts as an intervention activity for young people at risk in urban and rural Victoria. I would like to briefly explain the project to you and then try to make some sense of the artistic, social and political agenda driving this movement.

The project addresses two interrelated critical problems: the identification of effective diversionary programs for young people "at risk" and an analysis of the social impact of creative arts activity. The project explores whether youth with a background in harmful risk-taking behaviour are more likely to respond to intervention programs that focus on creative expression and involve excitement and risk, but within a safe framework. It focuses on the ways in which involvement in the arts can effect personal and skills development, resulting in improved self-esteem and social integration, and a decline in self-destructive behaviours. The project argues for the exploration of creative (rather than corrective) diversionary programs that operate from an assumption of latent or unrecognised potential in marginalised youth.

The project involves the establishment of creative arts programs in three Victorian...
communities: Dandenong, an outer suburb in southeast Melbourne; Footscray, an inner urban Western suburb; and Bendigo. Each of these areas has a low socio-economic profile, moderate to high unemployment and a high proportion of marginalised youth exhibiting a complex combination of risk factors. Footscray and Dandenong contain diverse communities with high proportions of first generation immigrants; Bendigo and Dandenong both include significant indigenous communities. A "one-stop" youth facility has been established in each area proving young people with the opportunity to access health, legal and social agencies from a single centre. These centres - Visy-Cares in Dandenong, The Junction in Footscray and B-Central in Bendigo - will provide the administrative base for each project, providing a ready point of access for researchers, community artists and participants. The project is also working in Parkville Youth Residential Centre, Melbourne’s detention centre for young women in custody.

In each of the three years of the project each region will support three creative arts projects of approximately twelve to sixteen weeks duration, employing community artists to lead each project. In any given year in each area the projects will involve engagement in different art forms, leading to an integrated community arts event such as a youth festival of arts or a performance project.

The project involves collaboration between academic researchers in three departments at the University of Melbourne: the School of Creative Arts, Arts Education and Criminology. Partner Investigators are drawn from the arts industry, juvenile justice and youth work fields. The project design uses a conceptual framework based on ethnography and involves field based data collection and analysis, an emergent design, grounded theory, and community and stakeholder input within a community research context. The research is participatory and collaborative with complex multi-faceted outcomes that are intended to inform multiple sector end-users of the research. While the methodology is primarily qualitative, it will also involve quantitative data collection and analysis. The projects are observed and participants are interviewed at the beginning, during and at the end of projects. Artists and "significant others" in the lives of participants are also interviewed.

The design of the creative arts programs draws upon the tradition of community arts projects established within the Australian context. This community arts agenda operates essentially as process, although many programs involve product outcome. The claims made for the positive outcomes of these programs are consistent and include, amongst other things:

- an increase in self esteem
- the establishment of new peer networks
- a valuing of identity, both personal and cultural
- community integration
- improved skills associated with risk factors
- improved literacy and numeracy skills

(Dreeszen, Aprill and Deasy, 1999; Fiske, 1999; Jones, 2000; Stone, McArthur et al., 1996)

‘Arts for Health’ as normalizing tool: ‘Empire’
Community arts programs which focus on "wellness" are initially elusive to critique from a contemporary perspective. This is because the philosophical and ethical structures underpinning them are informed by the contemporary cultural positions of post-modernity and post-colonialism, in that they:

- recognise and value diversity
- place the participants as subjects rather than objects
- avoid binary structures and exclusion
- engage the participants as partners in the process
- seek to subvert hegemonic structures

Above all, they preach empowerment, and there is now a substantial body of theory in this field, in part expanding on the significant and seminal work of Paulo Freire (1975) and Augusto Boal (1979).

VicHealth, now one of the main funding bodies for arts and health or arts and community building projects, sets out these basic principles for their Arts for Health program:

- Participation and involvement in arts and cultural activities can break down social isolation, increase feelings of connection and belonging, challenge prejudices and contribute to physical and mental health.
- The arts provide a valuable way for individuals and communities to explore. Celebrate and reflect their identity, challenges and inspirations.
- There is a strong correlation between individuals' health and that of their community. Strong, resilient and culturally vibrant communities offer better opportunities for personal growth, development and well-being.
- Individuals are more likely to be healthy if their economic and social circumstances strengthen their sense of security and self esteem, enhance feelings of control and optimism and create a sense of belonging with their community and the wider society (VicHealth, 2000).

But despite the rhetoric of social right that underpins this kind of work and despite some clear evidence that many young people do benefit from this work, as an arts educator I feel somewhat uncomfortable with it. Why?

The 2000 text *Empire* by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri poses a very interesting thesis, which might help us make some sense of this unease. The authors argue that, with the decline of colonial regimes and the collapse of the Soviet barriers to the world market, the last twenty years has heralded an irreversible and irresistible globalisation of economic and cultural exchanges. The sovereignty of nation states is declining and a new form of global sovereignty is materializing, which they call ‘Empire’. Empire is not imperialism but a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule.

The authors argue that this realisation of a world market is a shift from the old capitalist industrial tension towards communicative, co-operative labour. Global capitalism or Empire actually relies or builds on the post-modern and post-colonial critiques of modern nationalism and imperialism. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible
hierarchies and plural exchanges through modulating or shaping networks of command. Its object of rule is social life in its entirety – a ‘smooth world’ (Hardt and Negri, 2000:xiii).

This new global order is supported by an emergent juridical system, which embodies the old United Nations notion of right. It sets up an ethico-political dynamic that is at the very heart of the new juridical concept - a notion of ‘right’ or an appeal to essential values of justice. On this basis and in the service of right and peace, Empire can employ force, conduct policing work, and enter just wars. It has a right of intervention. The first task of Empire is to enlarge the realm of consensus that supports its power. But if there is not consensus, then there is the right of intervention (Hardt and Negri, 2000:11ff).

The authors outline a social shift from Foucauldian ideas of a disciplinary society to a society of control. The disciplinary society is one in which social command is constructed through a network of practices that regulate customs, habits and production. In the society of control, however, control extends well outside the structured sites of social institutions through flexible and fluctuating networks. It has ‘biopower’, a form of power that regulates social life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it and re-articulating it. This power is a control that extends through the depths of the consciousness and bodies of the population; it involves a mutual implication of all social forces that capitalism has pursued and now realised. It is the huge transnational corporations, which construct the fundamental connective fabric of this order of control through structuring and articulating territories and populations (Hardt and Negri, 2000:22ff).

These industrial powers not only produce commodities, they produce ‘agentic’ (agent-like) subjectivities - needs, social relations, bodies and minds. Needless to say, a site where this new order is located is the web of communication industries that have an organic relationship to the emergence of the new world order as effect and cause, product and producer (Hardt and Negri, 2000:32).

And as one might suspect in this ‘smooth world’, the powers of intervention begin more appropriately with moral instruments rather than weapons of lethal force.

What we call moral intervention is practiced today by a variety of bodies including the news media and the religious organizations but the most important may be some of the so called non-government organizations which, precisely because they are not run directly by governments, are assumed to act on the basis of ethical or moral imperatives. The global, regional and local organizations that are dedicated to relief work and the protection of human rights are, in effect, powerful pacific weapons of the New World order. Like the Dominicans in the late medieval period these groups strive to identify universal needs and defend human rights. They are immersed in the biopolitical context of Empire - they anticipate its pacifying and productive intervention of justice (Hardt and Negri, 2000:35-36).

My difficulty then with the drama for health, social change or empowerment agenda is its manipulating effect as a normalising tool of the global economy or, if you like, the tangible forces in our society that support this new hegemony. And it disturbs me that as educators, academics and welfare workers we may be complicit in managing this agenda, not for its own sake but for the benefits which accrue to us in research funds,
arts funding or even the opportunity to spread our own disciplinary power. When I now look at the title of our research project, *A cross-disciplinary investigation of creative arts as an intervention activity for young people at risk in urban and rural Victoria*, with its implicit assumptions of moral right, I feel a bit embarrassed.

**‘Community arts’ and the Saatchi & Saatchi Report**

Let me draw on four particular aspects of the current use of the community arts that worry me. I am now going to talk about product as well as process. The first two are social: firstly, the idea of normalisation or social control and management; secondly, the issue of surveillance. The third and fourth aspects relate to art: the interrelated notions of globalisation and appropriation supported by a constructed desire for fame and the famous.

(I): The idea of normalization

At the beginning of the 21st century it would seem that community arts are well and truly on the broad political agenda and not just in the Australia Council – but let’s start there.

The ‘Saatchi & Saatchi Report’ was commissioned by the Australia Council in 2000 and written by Paul Costantoura. This report, bravely entitled *Australians and the Arts*, was based on 16 discussion groups held around the country, a short clarifying survey of 120 people, a major survey of a further 1200 people, and extensive consultations with 200 people in the arts sector.

There were 13 key findings (2000:18-19). The first 12 suggest:

- While many Australians enjoy the arts, others don't feel welcome to enjoy the arts or see them as irrelevant.
- The arts sector is not well organised outside of its traditional market segments. It needs better communication within the sector, a shared vision, sharing of best practice both within the industry and with other industries, and a rethink of its needs and perceptions of the broader public.

Key Finding 13 states:

*The Future of the Arts will depend significantly on finding new supporters and markets outside the areas of traditional support. There has been considerable effort in some areas of the arts to move carefully and intelligently carve the existing (and in some instances declining) cake. An effective strategy to promote the value of the arts to all Australians will have the associated benefit of helping to bake ‘new audience cakes’ – or new markets where none currently exist (Costantoura, 2000:19).*

These findings were based on an analysis suggesting that Australians from all walks of life valued the arts, were inspired by it and believed it was a fundamental part of education. On the negative side the arts were seen as too elitist, too expensive, too city-centric and not sufficiently accessible to average Australians.

Twelve Strategic Objectives for promoting the value of the arts to Australians emerged out of the report. The thrust of these recommendations is to increase participation in the
arts through personal engagement and suitable entry points. The final objective is telling:


According to another section on education, the fact that Australians do not value the arts is a result of the formal education system. It suggests, somewhat paternalistically, that artist might work with teachers to, inter alia, ‘develop relevant and interesting curricula’. It also posits an alternative line of thinking within the sector - a view that all Australians need to have access to information and knowledge about the arts, at all ages, and in a form that can be readily understood and digested within their own terms and in their own time. The consequence of this would be a population prepared to dabble in and explore the arts and to be educated in the arts throughout their lives.

Implicit in these last phrases are the ways in which arts policy views community arts involvement and education vis-à-vis elite art. Indeed, the last two years have seen a widening rather than closing of the gap between the major companies and the rest. The furor at last year's 2002 Melbourne festival gives an indication that festival audiences are not interested in having community ingredients in their imported arts cake. Robyn Archer, the Director of the Festival, was soundly beaten up by the media for her so-called 'no-names Festival'.

It is also pertinent that the broader political issue of regional marginalisation and dissatisfaction has surfaced since the publication of the Saatchi & Saatchi report. It has become an election necessity for federal and state governments to work with other government and government funded institutions to address some of the issues in the report through community regeneration – and the arts are a powerful tool.

Without labouring this point, can I return to a project I mentioned earlier, Young People Building our Community: Greater Shepparton Building project (Carter, 2002), an initiative supported by the Victorian State Government. The aims of this project are simple - to ensure that young people stay in Shepparton. The report states:

As a response to joining the global economy all regional communities need to "think local" and to assess their strengths and weaknesses carefully. Greater Shepparton’s present weakness is that most of its young people leave the city after they complete school. In addition, too many young people run the risk of long-term exclusion from education and hence the global economy. Both these problems need to be tackled if Greater Shepparton is to build a vibrant creative workforce (2002:7).

The report goes on to argue for the needs of young people and to define the notions of human capital, intellectual capital and creative capital. It is of some interest that these sentiments are to be read in the works of a number of ex senior politicians – Brian Howe in Future Directions in Australian Social Policy: New Ways of Preventing Risk (2002) and Paul Keating in his book Development Health and Wealth of Nations (cited in Howe, 2002). Even the titles are telling.

What of the participants? Are they also implicated? I have noticed that a number of young people engaged in arts activities are surprisingly amenable, even those like young people in residential care and young refugees who might be seen to be on the
very margins. And I suspect sometimes they too are being merely complicit in what they recognise to be strategic ‘political’ activity towards a desired outcome - time out of school, a visa, easier work for the dole. Sometimes they’ll tell you just what you want to hear and sometimes they will be swept away by the sentiment involved in re-telling their own stories to engaged listeners. While notions of privacy are now a high policy priority for workers and researchers when dealing with young people in custody or care, it is not unusual for these young people to reveal the most intimate details about their lives when placed in a situation of public performance. Inevitably ‘confessional’ theatre, particularly when performed by marginalized young people, draws an extraordinarily positive and laudatory response from an audience. This response often encourages young people to reveal even more, as is often the case in post-performance discussions. But are the participants empowered through this process or do they just think they are?

(II): Surveillance

That brings me my second issue, observation or surveillance. In Discipline and Punish, Foucault invokes Bentham’s plan of a panopticon as a paradigm of disciplinary technology (reproduced in Rabinow, 1984:216-219). The panopticon is a structure with a tower in a central courtyard, which allows for a surveillance of the cells – the inmates are visible only to the observer, not to each other. He describes the power of the observer as continuous and anonymous, almost omniscient. Surveillance is now commonplace - Reality TV replicates the panopticon.

So do the qualitative methods that we employ in much of our research.

The difference is that those under surveillance have chosen to be observed. Or have they – even if they signed an agreement with the television station or the research team? In our research project, as I indicated earlier, we aim to observe the participants, to interview each of them three times as well as talk to one ‘significant other’ and the artists about them. While we are careful to have them sign consent forms to ensure ethical compliance – there’s that word again – how does observation of process or product sharing within the community really impact upon the kids involved in these programs? Surveillance is a ready bedfellow of voyeurism. When I watch public performances with highly marginalised people, such as Big H’Art’s Knot at Home, featured in last year’s Melbourne Festival, I feel uncomfortably voyeuristic. This is of course only if I distance myself from a sentimental or cathartic response.

(III-IV): Globalisation and the desire for fame

This brings me to points three and four. When the lines between art and life are blurred and culture commodified, appropriation almost necessarily follows. There is culture traffic it seems in stories from the margin - the reminiscences of the weak, the infirm, the ‘others’ and those who have strayed from the paths of ‘right’ and who are outside the control of power. These are dangerous stories, which offer audiences an opportunity to transgress the borders of safe bourgeois art and experience. On the other hand, participants are driven to tell their stories by the seductive appeal of fame, even if modest. It would seem that fame/stardom is another paradox in the global society - it is the ultimate identity, it embodies culture yet it transcends it. We all desire it - at least our 15 minutes worth. In a pilot program we undertook last year at Parkville Youth Residential Centre, the young artists asked the participants to tell their stories and enact them. There was an awful consistency about these stories - painful
childhoods, abuse, drugs, incarceration - for the telling of which each young woman was praised fulsomely. It is hard to know whether these stories were real or constructed, closely remembered or embellished. What struck me was that the participants expected to tell their stories and found the re-entering of pain through art both difficult and seductive. As an observer, I wondered if the telling and re-telling might have the effect of re-enforcing rather than liberating their victim-hood.

'Risky Business' – Where to now?

So where does that leave my thinking for the arts and health agenda?

Are both cultural product and process no more than a means to support an overarching and questionably moral political and economic leviathan, so eruditely outlined in Empire? The old-fashioned Marxist in me believes that art making is an extraordinarily powerful process that can provoke change. Art making is a political activity and always has been. The arts have the power to critique through representation, subversion, and metaphor. Art can be active - a weapon, rather than passive - a cure. Our interventions can be provocative rather than manipulative. Just as we need to interrogate our own motivations and practices within our community contexts, art making offers an opportunity for participants to interrogate the multi-layered communities in which they live. To do that they probably need to move beyond personal development and their own stories. We all start from where we are, but if we never move beyond there, how do we find the necessary distance to make sense of our communities and ourselves?

The arts operate as metaphor not reality. It is this aesthetic that not only allows us to understand ourselves but to glimpse and experience the transcendent - the Kantian divine. What are the narratives that can take us there? Not those that control experience, rather those that can expand it. When we are working with young people in a community context perhaps we should investigate the nature of those communities rather than assume them. We need to intervene morally rather than assume the moral right of intervention. When art is subordinated to social construction does it function as art?

These are the issues that confront us as we move further into the project which we have named "Risky Business". It is risky in many ways. To elaborate on where these questions are taking us must be the substance of a later report.

REFERENCES


Carter, Jan (2002) Young People Building our Community: Greater Shepparton Building Project (Shepparton: The Fairley Foundation)


Arts Education Partnership


VicHealth (2000) *Community Arts Participation Scheme Funding Guidelines* (Carlton: VicHealth)
Author/s:
O'BRIEN, ANGELA

Title:
Art through pain: the panacea

Date:
2003

Citation:

Publication Status:
Published

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/34607

File Description:
Art through pain - The panacea

Terms and Conditions:
Terms and Conditions: Copyright in works deposited in Minerva Access is retained by the copyright owner. The work may not be altered without permission from the copyright owner. Readers may only download, print and save electronic copies of whole works for their own personal non-commercial use. Any use that exceeds these limits requires permission from the copyright owner. Attribution is essential when quoting or paraphrasing from these works.