

Ranting With Cyle: What is an Artist?

In Memory of Jason Cook by Cyle Durkee

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What is an artist? An artist is many things. An artist is an individual who creates, certainly. But, there is so much more to the description. Artists are those who strive for something new, even if it is only a new perspective on an old concept. Artists are those who are unafraid to speak in public. Artists are those who allow the basis of their being to be exposed to the light of day. Artists find a way to create, though entire societies may be set up to impede their process. Artists mirror, exemplify, glorify, repudiate, question, and answer the societies that help create them. Artists are inspired, and therefore, inspire. And when one dies, this is what we lose. Let's explore why the death of an artist seems to affect the world and its inhabitants in such a profound way.

Certainly, artists are not the only ones who create. Construction workers, for example create many structures that are necessary for the continuation of our way of life. Tailors create beautiful clothes. Landscapers create beautiful vistas. Or so it would seem. I would say to you that the workers in this case, while wonderful and capable, are, in fact, simply taking items that already exist in the world and rearranging them. The person who drafts the design of the house is an artist, but the one who builds it is simply taking pre-existing materials and moving them into place according to the artists design. The tailor is following the design patterns that an artist has created. The landscaper is moving plants from one place to another. And before you get your panties in a twist (and start writing hate mail {which I haven't gotten yet [though I've tried pretty hard]}) understand that I know that there are those that do all of this. There are many architects who help in the building of the project and tailors who design their own clothes and so on. And in those cases they, too, are artists. In this case I am simply stating that artists are those who create something that has not existed before. And when one dies the world is poorer for the fact that this artist will no longer be able to create. There is less chance for something new and beautiful in this world than there was a moment before their death.

Artists are willing to speak up. They are driven to seek the spotlight and disseminate their words. Artists want to let people know of their work (this is not always the case, but it is true in the vast majority of artists). There is another group of people who endeavor to do this: Evangelists. I bring them up as an example of extreme opposites using the same techniques and getting incredibly different outcomes. Artists attempt to disseminate their work as widely as possible in an effort to create a following. Evangelicals do the same. Artists attempt to get their followers to pay money to purchase their art/ buy tickets to their shows/ support future endeavors. Evangelicals attempt to get their followers to pay money to purchase salvation/ buy t-shirts and tchotchkes/ build bigger churches. It seems strangely similar to me, but

there is one key difference: the basis of their endeavors. Evangelicals are attempting to convince people that there is only one book that matters. The attempt is to narrow the vision of a person to perceive only one story as true. The artists attempt to broaden the horizon of everyone who views their work. The artist will create new works all the time in an attempt to witness and interpret the world. So instead of locking the minds of their followers inside the cover of a single book, an artist will help their followers minds grow wings. An artist will help to set a mind free. When an artist dies we lose a liberator. We witness the shackles on ourselves and others knowing that this keymaster will not be back to remove them.

Artists follow their dreams. They swim against the currents that are created by the movement of societies towards communal goals. They do what every Disney movie tells you to do: Be true to yourself. In doing so, they face adversity in every aspect of their lives. Yes, you have seen many celebrity “artists” (that’s in quotations because reality tv stars {in general} are not artists {they are leeches on the artistic process [and pretty much the worst that society has to offer while attempting to prove to the rest of the world that they are, in fact, the best <nobody’s buying it>]}) who seem to be living the good life. And yes, they exist. But the vast majority of artists live lives that are filled with doubt and worry. Will they be able to find a job that will allow them to pay rent while maintaining their ability to create? Will they be able to pay rent with the minimum wage job that they do find? Where will they find rehearsal space, and how will they pay for it? Where will they display their work? When will inspiration hit? How will they maintain a relationship when they are busy 16 hours a day? There’s no food in the fridge, should they eat their canvas? Should they start stalking a Kardashians in an attempt to get a spin-off? And through all of these questions there is one thing that keeps them going: A desire to create. That drive is paramount in a true artist. Our society is set up to treat art as though it is a luxury activity that should be abolished in favor of sports programs and science fairs. Sports and science are important, yes. But dance is a sport that works out every muscle in your body while giving you a huge cardio workout. And artists like Jules Verne helped to shape the direction that science moves in our society.

When an artist dies we lose a fighter. We lose someone who is willing to give up everything that their friends and families take for granted (promotions, retirement, vacations) in order to inspire the rest of the world to move forward.

Artists are the vanguard that we send into the darkness. They come back with stories of treasures, and magic, and monsters. As the rest of society moves forward into that suddenly lighter space they discover chemistry, games, math, philosophy, sports, love, war, astrophysics. Artists take the lantern and hang it high so that others can follow in the knowledge that they are not the first to brave the darkness. Someone before them has survived and moved on. Art imitates life, sure. But the life that art imitates, so often, is a life that no one has yet seen on this earth. Artists are the beacons. And every time one winks out the world becomes a little darker and the path ahead a little less certain.

Dedicated to Jason Cook.