

ART SPARKS

navigating the tides of change, both inside and outside of myself

Life beats down and crushes the soul, and art reminds you that you have one. – Stella Adler

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A RETURN WITHIN

Embarking on a new chapter in a new city has always sounded exhilarating to me. Everything different, nothing the same as before. Faces, morning coffee, a new room in which to sleep, all changed and moving, in sync with my new existence in this contrasting realm of streets and lights. I ride buses and trains without concern for their final destination; adventure falls in step with each assertive stride I take. The sun is warm and blinding, illuminating everything before me. Momentarily, I shine too. I'm disorientated, but I tell myself it doesn't matter and I don't care.

Such utopian notions of change formed effortlessly, but the actuality of moving was difficult. Everything was indeed different, just not in the ways I'd expected. I'd envisioned myself diving into newness, arms outstretched. But instead I was intimidated and I recoiled. Initially, starting over manifested in an uncomfortable series of rejections—something I'd rarely experienced before. Bereft of familiar company, I spent most days alone, meeting regularly instead with my insecurities. I did my best to remain positive, but I felt blue. The things I'd once approached with abandon were now ominous. I questioned my entry points into the ocean and scrambled beneath the pull of its mass. Driving a car induced mild panic. I struggled to focus while reading, and my writing stalled. Impatience ruled but never urged me to see my situation differently. My behaviour grew vapid and withdrawn. I was convinced that everyone I met found me boring. The usually attractive prospect of leaving the house was now often replaced by a persistent feeling of uncertainty. The refuge of my bed and the dull glow radiating from my phone screen boasted a facile excuse of reality that I found hard to refuse.

Unmet expectations loomed softly as I tried again to regain my footing. I longed for routine, stability, inspiration, to be swept under by creative forces beyond my control. A dull ache for my usual sense of self began in my stomach and spread all over until it absorbed me entirely.

Closing my eyes, I urged myself to remember a time or place where I felt moved—by anything, by *something*. The banks of my memory slowly gave way: being seventeen years old in London with my twin sister, seeing the artworks of Henri Matisse for the first time at the Tate; staring into *Paint-erly Architectonic* (1917) by Lyubov Popova at MoMA after studying her work for weeks at university; lying barefoot beneath *4th Floor to Mildness* (2016) by Pipilotti Rist, utterly memorised by the scenes unfolding above me. Time and time again, art had provided me with transportive gateways to elsewhere. Could art now help me initiate an act of self-reclamation by guiding me inward, through these volatile tides of change, inciting a return to the intentions that murmured deep within my soul?

I'm moving through this. I was stagnant for a while, but I can feel myself moving through this.

To find a way back to myself, I decided to try first with art.

Art and the Institution

Roaming around an art space was not only a welcome distraction but also a means to address my desire to think openly again, to stimulate my mind that had become self-absorbed and insular in the shadows of change. Behind tall walls of bricks and mortar, was it possible to find a clearer reflection of myself? Could art assist me in connecting to this new place and back to my identity? Could art guide me inward, back to my sense of self?

We look to art museums as the safekeepers of the past and present, the finest repositories of art and culture from all over the world. Arguably, they're more than grand storage facilities. Today, art museums have redefined themselves. Beyond underlying practices of conservation and preservation, they continue to become more accessible, to shift their language and offerings in order to better engage with the diverse needs of contemporary society.

More than anything, art institutions have perfected their ability to incite human curiosity and wonder. Art critic and philosopher Boris Groys once wrote that the primary function of the museum is 'to let us imagine what is outside the museum as infinite.' Groys explains that our experiences are 'finite' as 'we ourselves are finite,' and so, the art museum facilitates a

space for spectators to 'imagine the world outside the museum's walls as splendid, infinite, ecstatic.' Groys' argument proposes that the act of visiting an art museum transcends the physical experience at hand, rather urging us to rethink and rediscover the boundless possibilities beyond the building's walls. The varied outpourings of art—paintings, drawings, sculptures, installations, textiles, ceramics, video works—become symbolic viewing portals into the outside world, allowing us to see and reimagine the infinite potential of our everyday experiences.

While art museums might encourage us to look out, they may also guide us in. Art historian Colleen Leth refers to museums as 'secular temples of analog experience.' Leth suggests that the allure of museums lies in their curation of images and the ability of these images, whether they be abstract paintings or ancient vessels, to answer three central questions: Where do I come from? Who am I? And where am I going? Leth proposes that visiting a museum is an intimate act, one that allows us to ruminate on our relationship to ourselves and the world around us, to reconnect to place and identity, and to visualise where these findings might lead. Museums provide us with the unique opportunity to reflect on our inner workings and to see parts of ourselves in the visual representations made by others. They allow us to capture, form, and expand on new understandings of our lived experiences through the unconventional vision of the artist. By entering an art museum, we surrender our senses to the power of divine curiosity. Museums challenge us and encourage us to explore our thoughts and reactions meaningfully, in front of things that are closest to what we are and what we've been.

Having decided to explore the potential of connecting back to myself through art, I visited museums with newfound purpose. I willed myself to be present, to empty my mind, and to clear space. I discovered solace in the simple act of viewing without forcing any response. Moments of self-reflection began to arrive freely.

Standing before a painting titled *Garnkiny Ngarranggarni* (2016) by Indigenous Australian artist Mabel Juli, I was drawn into the darkness of a vast black night sky and the bright glow of a crescent moon anchored to a mountain's peak. Simple forms told an emotive age-old tale of moon dreaming—one I'd never heard before. I thought about Juli and how she constantly returned to the same moon dreaming over time in order to maintain her connection to culture and country. Dazed, I wandered from the direct meaning of the work and found a certain calmness in the inescapable abyss of the black paint. I saw a void, a coalescence of loneliness and isolation, similar to the one I'd noticed inside of myself. If I could embody the abyss, maybe I could be the moon, maybe I could be the mountain. Surely I could persevere in a new city as I'd always intended, with confidence and purpose? Bowing my head, I made a silent truce with the negativity that had misled my thoughts and ambitions. I felt a wave of newness rising, and for the first time in weeks, I let it wash over me without asking why. This feeling of newness wasn't daunting. Juli's work invited me in and asked me what I saw and how that made me feel, without judgement or expectation.

Art as/in Therapy

Where the museum might house art and provoke our experiences with it, it is the galvanising force of art itself that drives our reactions, feelings, and emotions. To quote philosopher Susan Langer, 'The primary function of art is to objectify experience so that we can contemplate and understand it.' In many ways, art is an emotional enabler. In 1942, a British artist, Adrian Hill, supposedly first coined the term "art therapy," prior to publishing his book *Art Versus Illness*, which maintained the idea that art-based activity could help the ill manage their souls and inner worlds. Since then, art therapy, or art psychotherapy, has become a trusted ally of traditional healthcare practices, falling under the healthcare movement of "social prescribing" (non-medical support).

The mid-1990s saw the emergence of contemporary art therapy, which began to unpack the concept of art as a therapy tool. *Art As Therapy*, written by philosophers Alain de Botton and John Armstrong, explores the idea of art as a tool, and proposes what tool it might be, arguing that 'art (a category that includes works of design, architecture and craft) is a therapeutic medium that can help guide, exhort and console its viewers, enabling them to

become better versions of themselves.' The authors go on to identify seven main psychological frailties that art might help with, which ultimately define what they believe to be the seven functions of art: remembering, hope, sorrow, rebalancing, self-understanding, growth, and appreciation. It's through consideration of these several vulnerable categories that de Botton and Armstrong suggest how art can effectively nurture our most intimate and common difficulties—or problems of the soul—and instigate inner change.

In order to help people cope with these fragilities, contemporary art therapy programs are flexible and collaborative, mostly combining art practice with museum visits. Guided sessions of physical art-making aim to assist patients to express their feelings and experiences through engaging in and reflecting on creative process. During museum visits, participants analyse a range of specific artworks prescribed for them by an art therapist, in order to uncover similarities, associations, and interpretations of the art—or artist—in relation to their own human experiences. Catering to people of all ages and to a diverse range of emotional, physical, and mental conditions, art therapy programs ultimately create safe spaces where patients are able to explore their desires, memories, thoughts, and intentions, both verbally and non-verbally. Elisabeth Ioannides, from the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens, explains, 'Within the museum space, art therapists can provide new and creative experiences for the participants, and interact with them in new ways. Participants, on the other hand, can find inspiration and different ways to create and tell their own stories.'

The notion that art has the ability to soothe and heal a variety of ailments continues to rise and permeate contemporary society. In May 2017, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts hired the first full-time art therapist in North America, Stephen Legari, who sees and treats 1200 patients per year. New studies undertaken by the Art Fund in the United Kingdom found that people under 30 are twice as likely to visit a museum or gallery at least once a month, specifically to "de-stress." And researchers from the University of California in Berkeley say statistics show that art can boost your immune system by lowering levels of bodily chemicals that cause inflammation and illness.

While I began to find my way back to myself through art, I noticed the effects of the museum at work in others too. Wandering into a bright orange gallery room, I found wool sculptures, coloured a vivid sky blue, suspended from the ceiling, with others arched and contorted around black steel spools on the ground. As I walked through the installation—*Exhaled Weight* (2019) by Mira Gojak—I noticed some plastic chairs in the left corner of the room, strewn together, presumably in an effort to be on time. As a group of elderly men were ushered in and encouraged to take a seat, I moved along the perimeter toward the opposite side of the room, a silent voyeur intrigued by the possibility of viewing art therapy in action. The instructor sat down and pulled her seat closer to the group, a large blue ball of wool in her hand. I observed her fingers, which had begun to unravel the wool and expose its length with each swift outstretch of her hand. She was explaining the meaning of the material she was holding and the way it related to the artwork before the group. 'Between 50,000 and 60,000 metres up, the sky's blue colour begins to run out and turn black.' I looked up and wondered about space. The idea of piercing the atmosphere had always seemed inconceivable to me, although the blue wool enabled the space between the sky and infinity to become tangible, non-threatening. It brought my fears of the unknown back to earth so my imagination could soar instead. I watched on. Some of the participants were less interested than others and shuffled uncomfortably in their seats, though I saw one man adjust his hearing device, cross one leg over the other, and lean in.

Art and Me

Standing in front of an artwork has now become an integral part of my personal practice, a ritual that offers a way back to myself. A form of meditation, a still and often quiet moment alone, where breath and subject matter melt together in gentle contemplation. The act of rediscovering myself through art was steeped in feeling rather than logic or understanding. What did occur to me, though, was that art had a profound ability to shift my perspective. As Groys suggested, artworks became portals that extended

beyond the museum, allowing me to reimagine the infinite possibilities that lie both inside and outside of myself. Surrounding myself with art sparked a reclamation of self, of ecstasy, and of all that I felt had abandoned me in between. Observation invited release, catharsis—of my feelings, my thoughts, and the negative tension that had pervaded my body and my mind. The ambiguity surrounding newness began to fade and dissolve. I felt lighter, simply by focusing my attention on what was in front of me. Ultimately, each artwork that I spent time with provided me with important clues and anecdotes that enabled me to trace a wandering line back to my soul, to my truest intentions.

Deconstructing artworks and their meaning reminded me that I'm capable of reworking my neural pathways and summoning my own opinions from the depths of my consciousness. Seeking out exhibitions delivered me a sense of purpose—not just for knowledge or answers but also for different routes to walk and other structures to admire. Every space I encountered caused inspiration to rise and turn inside me. Art enabled me to step outside of myself so I could look back in, eyes anew.

Perhaps when we forget who we are, art can remind us. Art can lead us back to the endless possibilities that lie outside and within. Through acknowledging what we resonate with and asking why, art can replenish us, nurture us, and fortify our soul's intentions. Bearing a gentle invitation, art extends its hand to us and asks for nothing in return.

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