

Research in Practice (ADAD5004) Dissertation Proposal

HOW DOES MENTAL ILLNESS AFFECT ART?

BROOKE DICK (1902051)

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Student Name: Brooke Dick

Student Number: 1902051

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Louise Burston

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Introduction

My chosen area of research is what is the role art plays in mental health? The question I hope to answer is *How does art affect mental health?* 'The life of a tortured artist.' It is a phrase known to most. But how is the word "tortured" used in this context? As a practitioner who struggles with my own mental health, I am particularly interested in questions surrounding the affect art can have on mental wellbeing. Within my dissertation proposal I will be looking at 3 key words, Mental health, Art Therapy and Social Media I will gather my research to form a question that will be answered in my dissertation.

Mental Health



Figure 1. *The Starry Night*, Oil on canvas (Van Gogh, 1889).

“I put my heart and my soul into my work and lost my mind in the process” – Vincent Van Gogh. Keenan (2021).

Mental health has been linked to the arts for centuries. It can be assumed that there might be a direct link between the two. “It has been alleged that the depressive illness makes creative persons more sensitive and more productive while undergoing manic episodes.” Rothenburg (2018). The assumption that practitioners are more productive when facing mania could stem from the fact that some of the worlds most famous artists were ones

plagued by hallucinations and delusions. "I cannot get rid of my illnesses, for there is a lot in my art that exists only because of them," Munch (2020). Artist Edvard Munch believed that he had to suffer to be able to create his art. A lot of artists have this mindset but is it practical? Vincent van Gogh is another artist who created his most substantial work while in a state of mirage, his works are so popular because of his warped perspective of the world, a view that could be due to an over medication of digitalis. "People receiving large and repeated doses of this drug often see the world with a yellow-green tint. They complain of seeing yellow spots surrounded by coronas". Wolf (2001). This could explain the anomalies found in his '*The Starry Night*' painting. This can be supported by one of van Gogh's portraits on his physician Paul-Ferdinand Gachet, Gachet can be seen holding a stem of Digitalis purpurea. If this is the cause that defined van Gogh's artistic vision perhaps, he might have produced a different style of work, had he been mentally and physically well. But would his work still be as celebrated? van Gogh tragically took his own life in 1890. "Oh, if I could have worked without this accursed disease - what things I might have done". van Gogh (1890). It seems that van Gogh understood that his illness may have repressed his abilities. Research on mental health has improved greatly since then, new treatments and medicines are available. Had these remedies been available at van Gogh's time we might have avoided the tragic loss of this most celebrated artist and we could have potentially seen his artistry grow further. But are creative persons more likely to have mental illnesses? A 2009 study done by Semmelweis University found that "genetic polymorphisms related to severe mental disorders" were found in people with the "highest creative achievements and creative-thinking scores." (Conasür, 2019). "Karolinska Institute found writers have a higher risk of suffering from anxiety, schizophrenia, and substance abuse." The Untethered Mind: Creativity and Mental Illness (Conasür, 2019). Concerningly, they concluded that writers

were 121% more likely to be bipolar, and 50% more likely to commit suicide. I investigated why historically artistic people are most often found to have mental illnesses, what I found was many creative persons came from poverty, they would put their art before their wellbeing and spend countless hours without rest and food and they were more likely to be involved with substance abuse all of which can have lasting effects on the mind. The lifestyle of some artists can be a cause of poor mental stability. It can be concluded that with a healthy lifestyle and routine mental wellbeing can be improved in the artistic community. As for those who require medications there are many modern solutions to mental well-being. However, modern medicines do not always have the desired effect. "First line medication for bipolar disorder, lithium, can cause cognitive dulling and slowing, and limit emotional and perceptual range for some individuals. This is especially significant for those working in creative fields". Slegers (2012). As creatives we rely on our ability to use our emotions to create our art. If treatments prohibit this as someone who struggles for motivation and emotional compatibility without medication it can be understood why some refuse it. "Illness, madness and death were the black angels that watched over my cradle and have since followed me through life," Munch wrote in his notes. There is no definite cure to mental ailments and most who have them will battle for all their lives so finding alternative methods of treatment could mean the difference between life and death.

Art Therapy



Fig 2. *Chandelier of Grief*, Chandelier, steel, aluminium, mirrored glass, acrylic, motor, plastic, and LEDs (2016).

“Participating in the arts can enable people to deal with a wide range of mental ill health conditions.” Mental Health Foundation (2019).

While an artist’s lifestyle can have a negative effect on a person’s mental well-being, the act of creating itself can be healing. Adrian Hill is credited as the founder of art therapy. “Hill’s 1945 book ‘Art versus Illness’ Documents the birth of the field” Bush (2018). While recovering from tuberculosis Hill was bedbound and found time stood still. He began to

draw to pass the time. "While lazily composing my drawing, the hands of my wrist-watch began to move again, silently and unseen round the dial," (The British Journal of Nursing, 1946, p.16). He found that time passed with ease. In 1941 after his recovery, he was asked by a therapist to help conduct a treatment that uses painting and drawing for service casualties. It was not until 1942 while teaching art to a small group of patients recovering from tuberculosis that Hill considered the potential of the practice. In 1945 he proposed the launching of an art therapy program at a sanatorium. "To be happily occupied is at all times a gift from the Gods, and in a period of long convalescence, it is a saving grace" (Hill, 1945, p.30). Being bedbound is out of patient control this can harshly affect the mind and thus moral Hill understood this. His influence spread and more people joined in promoting healing through arts. The national Association for the Prevention of Tuberculosis implemented an art therapy programs in hospitals and sanatoria. The British Association of art Therapists was founded. Hill's work was an "instrument for the treatment of disease and the prevention of unhappiness" (Hill, 1945). Artist Yayoi Kusama has used her art as an emotional and mental escape. "I had dark days and unfortunate times, but I overcame them with the power of art." Manatakis (2018). Kusama is one of the first artists that come to mind regarding using art therapy. Her works mirror her mind. She uses her art to clear her mind of childhood traumas, to recreate her hallucinations and face oppression. As a child Kusama was heavily discouraged by her mother to pursue a career in art. She forced her to spy on her father to which she witnessed his many affairs "“Because my mother was very angry it made even the idea of sex very traumatic for me. My work... is always about overcoming that bad experience.” In 1962 she began a series called *Accumulations* which featured soft phallic sculptures that represented her sexual anxieties. "I put a lot of phalli inside and outside a boat because I had a great fear of and disdain for such things as sex and

the phallus. I used it as an art therapy to cope with my obsessions.” Ong (2018). In

Kusama’s work patterns are very present. Kusama explains that this stems from a need of self- obliteration.

“One day I was looking at the red flower patterns of the tablecloth on a table, and when I looked up, I saw the same pattern covering the ceiling, the windows and the walls, and finally all over the room, my body and the universe. I felt as if I had begun to self - obliterate, to revolve in the infinity of endless time and the absoluteness of space and be reduced to nothingness.” (Manatakis 2018 <https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/41742/1/five-quotes-on-mental-health-from-yayoi-kusama-world-mental-health-day>).

Kusama hallucinates repeated patterns she reproduces these in her work, as a child she was unable to express her visions, they would consume her and later she suffered a nervous breakdown which led her to receive psychiatric treatment. Painting was the only way she could express and release what she was seeing in her mind. “By translating hallucinations into paintings, I have been trying to cure my disease,” Manatakis (2018). These representations can be firstly seen in her *Pacific Ocean* piece and more recently her *Infinity Rooms* series. In 1974 she attempted to commit suicide, she found a hospital that provided art therapy and later admitted herself. “I fight pain, anxiety, and fear every day, and the only method I have found that relieves my illness is to keep creating art. I followed the thread of art and somehow discovered a path that would allow me to live.” Manatakis (2018). It could be said that art saved Kusama’s life.

Social Media

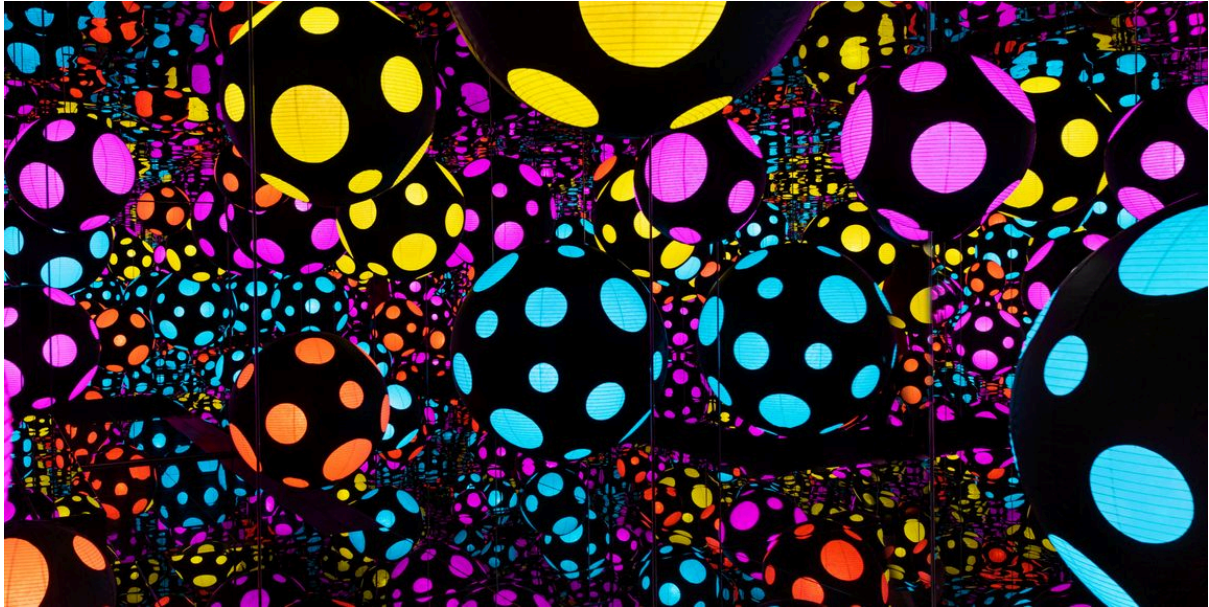


Fig.3 *Infinity Mirrored Room - My Heart is Dancing into the Universe* (2018).

It is no secret that social media can have negative effects on our mental health. We find ourselves comparing one another, whether it be how our bodies look or the lifestyles we live. There seems to be an idealised view on how life should be. I want to look at the effects that social platforms have on creative persons and their crafts, I am going to look at the pros and cons. Social platforms have changed the way practitioners work. With online portfolios and marketing, it is easier than ever to advertise and sell our crafts. We can build followings and connect instantaneously with other creators. We can network and find job opportunities easily. Which are all positives for using social networks. But some negatives points are, firstly there is a need to know everything about a person. Yayoi Kusama is “a

living trope of the whacky, tortured artist stereotype that appeals to today's voyeuristic culture of wanting to know everything, about everyone, through the internet." Ong (2018). We have decided we are entitled to whatever information we seek even if it is private, this kind of interaction with people in the public eye can be damaging when people decide they do not like what they have found. Secondly, 'Cancel Culture' is a modern form of ostracism. "The term for people who have been thrust out of social or professional circles in this way — either online or in the real world or sometimes both — is 'cancelled.'" McDermott (2019). Being 'politically woke' can be a positive and negative thing for example promoting the "me too" movement and ending the terrorism of abusers like Harvey Weinstein. Major cases like this are when it is acceptable to end careers. But there should be different approaches for different situations for example calling out any hate speech or behaviour. It is better to try and educate and give chances to improve rather than deciding who can keep their livelihoods and who cannot. We have become so obsessed with trying to determine who is a 'good' and who is 'bad' that old comments and behaviours are brought up to 'expose'. People change, we learn and adapt, and our beliefs change with us. The internet is an archive, and anyone can access it. Anything you have said and done online is recorded, this is an issue for those of us who spent our most impressionable years online. Everything idiotic thing we have said can be traced. Which is a worry to those who want careers that will require a public presence it can cause anxieties and we become ultra-aware of our online presence and we censor ourselves. But that goes against art. Creatives are supposed to speak their minds. "Artists and curators continue to be at the forefront of the dangerous but necessary work of driving social change." Batycka (2020). We use our voices to incite change and speak our truths, we should have not to fear losing our livelihoods because of that. The next point that plagues creatives online is comparison, we compare our work to

that of other creators, we see the differences in 'likes' and 'followers'. It can be disheartening when hours are spent on creating pieces that we are proud enough to share and it does not get the recognition we would have liked. Even though art is not made for the purpose of being 'liked', it is still nice to see appreciation and understanding of the purpose and process. When it does not have the impact, we hoped it would, it can affect our mental wellbeing. The last point I would like to make is the excessive posting of art. "These incessant selfies commodify the work. It's become an accessory to the cause of social media and detracts from the artist's innovation." Ong (2018). When the art is taken out of context for the use of a backdrop to someone's latest selfie the meaning is lost, the purpose is replaced for an aesthetic value. "The artist's work on social media is becoming so ubiquitous it's bordering on mundane, a far cry from the artist's intention to outwardly express her inner hallucinations." Ong (2018). Jyni Ong is referring to the work of Kusama in the context of losing its value. Art is meant to be appreciated in more than one way but when it is used to gain 'likes' online it can lose its significance this could affect an artist if they feel their art is becoming commercialised.

Conclusion

Concluding my dissertation proposal, I have explored three key words and tried to form a relationship to one another. **Art therapy** and **Mental health** have very strong links, for obvious reasons. **Mental health** and **Social Media** have a connection because of the affect social platforms can have on our mental wellbeing. Finding a source to link **Social Media** and **Art therapy** was harder but I think the link is the promotion of art and art being used as

therapy such as the work of Yayoi Kusama. I began this proposal with a question; *How does art affect mental health?* I do not feel as though I can fully answer this question within the word limit as I have come to my conclusion with so many other questions. I wonder other than Yayoi Kusama how many other artists use art therapy? What is the success rate? Is there a science that can support the method? I am also fascinated by the tumultuous life of Kusama, I want to research how her art and story has brought awareness to those living with mental illness? While researching van Gogh I became charmed by his language in his letters. After hearing about his delusions, I half expected incessant rambling, but I was pleasantly surprised by his penmanship I want to find out more about the man behind the paintings and how he lived his life? All these questions have led me to one final question to which I plan to answer in my dissertation. ***How does mental illness affect art?*** Under this question I can research topics such as the questions stated above, the influence art therapy has, and which artists use it? How are the lives of artists affected by mental health? I can research ways in which artists can keep up moral and motivation to work during a manic episode. What categories do most artists with mental issues fall under? Topics of antifragility, acceptance and courage come to mind. Are there any artists that are advocating for mental health awareness? What are they doing to bring change? All these topics have been considered for further exploration in my dissertation next year.

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Fig 1. Van Gogh, V. (1889) *The Starry Night*. [Oil on Canvas] Museum of Modern Art, New York City. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Starry_Night (Accessed: 24 April 2021).

Fig 2. Kusama, Y. (2016) *Chandelier of Grief*. [Chandelier, steel, aluminium, mirrored glass, acrylic, motor, plastic, and LEDs] Tate Modern, London. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/kusama-chandelier-of-grief-t15202> (Accessed: 24 April 2021).

Fig 3. Kusama, Y. (2018) *Infinity Mirrored Room—My Heart is Dancing Into the Universe*.

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