

Creating Beauty in Prison: Mona Lisa & The Milky Way

Irina Katz-Mazilu*

Visual Artist, Art Therapist, Paris, France.

*Correspondence:

Irina Katz-Mazilu, Visual Artist, Art Therapist, Paris, France.

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an experience of art making and art therapy in prison. Based on the humanistic person centered therapeutic approach, art therapy is a powerful method of socializing and enhancing self-esteem in people with trauma and post-traumatic syndrom. Aesthetic brain, affective aesthetics and empathic creativity are recent concepts defined by neuroscience and art therapy joint research. The description and illustration of the group workshops' protocole on deep exploration of beauty in everyday life, in nature and in culture, proves the importance of using non-verbal universal art communication for personal and social emotional regulation and balance.

Keywords

Prison, Aesthetic brain, Affective aesthetics, Empathic creativity, Beauty, Art, Art therapy, Trauma, Group workshops.

Introduction

There is no doubt that imprisonment is a traumatic experience. Life in prison is challenging in many ways: by lack of intimacy in overcrowded establishments under permanent surveillance and control, with affective and sexual deprivation, by absence of any contact with nature. Prisoners are deprived of normal possibility to manage their space and time as decision making is limited. They only can wait... This condition creates physical and mental disbalance for people who already have experienced trauma, often since their early ears. PTSD and C-PTSD are manifest in a great majority of prisoners. Offering the possibility to be active and creative is a precious lever in mental health healing and for the resilience fostering panoply.

I was a middle-aged visual artist, woman and mother, when at the end of my art therapy training I was offered a job in prison. It consisted in leading weekly art workshops with groups of men and women, separately, inside the biggest prison in France, the Maison d'Arrêt de Fresnes. I had no previous knowledge about prison, except from movies and books. But in time this professional experience showed off both highly challenging and deeply useful for my personal growing. I learned a lot about life in prison, life in

general, human nature - and myself.

Aesthetic Brain and Emotional Regulation

Contemporary neuroscientific research explores human body-mind functioning in new perspectives. Recent findings prove that the aesthetic activity - present from the oldest times in all human societies - is linked to a vital homeostatic need, both on individual and on community level. Emotional regulation and balance are primary basic needs for our well-being and relationships. Our brain, our vagal and limbic systems, our perception through senses are meant to provide it [1]. The « aesthetic brain » is part of our fondamental responses to the species' thriving to survival.

Active aesthetic experienced through art making and creative self-expression help prisoners to manage their internal energetic and emotional balance in stressful conditions. Art helps adressing deep identity gulfs, clarifying and empowering self-esteem breach, offers communication possibilities in non-verbal, accessible and soft ways. Prisoners who never imagined art making by themselves quickly perceive the benefits and join the groups. Prisons are not intended to be healing establishments...yet prisoners highly need mental help [2]. Besides medical and psychological care, group activities with arts media - art, theatre, music, dance - are greatly appreciated by prisoners.

Affective Aesthetics and Empathic Creativity

Pierre Lemaquis is a French neurologist who writes on the connection between the aesthetic experience and our affective life [3]. This human capability is a response to primary needs. Emotional regulation and balance is as vital as all other basic functions. This is why arts have been present since the oldest human societies all over the world. Either through receptive arts activities or by arts making we are able to feel and express emotions in a powerful non-verbal way. Even if aesthetics are influenced by socio-cultural backgrounds, the human affective life is the same for everyone. Thus « ...art is a way to fraternize, sais...Albert Cohen » [4]. Socializing in prison is not easy and art making is one of the best ways to implement a good place for it.

Art therapy acts by merging the art process and the therapeutic process in a specific way. Thus, empowering creativity is one of the main elements of the method - but, if it is necessary, it is not sufficient. We speak about empathic creativity [5], which is the art therapy's specific path to get connected to others. Empathy is one of the basic ingredients for successful human relationships - and for psychotherapies - but imprisonment does not facilitate it. If empathy is always creative - as it creates an emotional connection - creativity is not always empathic. So the artist/art therapist has to train the capability to empathic creativity and find the good distance to his/her own narcissic creativity as part of the creative process [6].

Vicarious Traumatization and Resilience

Transfer and countertransfer issues are more intense in prison work than outside. Health and prison professionals are confronted with people undergoing stressful life conditions and specific mental conditions: post-traumatic syndroms, depression, addiction, violence, psychotic or psychopathic profiles...Many prisoners arouse feelings of compassion. Their life stories are often so determined by domestic and social violence, poverty, adverse events, that the question: How would I have act at his/her place? might get tapping... I remember a woman who told that drug traffic was the own way to pay for her daughter's highschool...a man said that if at age of 12 he could have met a person like me he would never finish in prison...another one said that since age 3 he was left alone in the street because all the men in his family were in prison and all the women were prostitutes...Their stories might echo events in any life. Sometimes compassion, fear and horror might be experienced simultaneously. How lucky I am to not be at their place...how lucky I am not to have met this man in the street one night...

I only led group workshops, yet sometimes some of them shared a private short conversation in the margins. Once a prisoner asked a home-baked cake for the end-of-session celebration - but this was prohibited for security reasons, only packed industrial sweets were authorised...A woman asked a thermometer to be able to plan a meeting with her partner - she wished to have a baby with him, both had long-time sentences for their membership in ETA...I also remember corsicans singing a capella in the workshop... an

infanticide caribbean woman singing heart-breaking gospels... The deep and painful contrasts of the human nature are highly accentuated in the prison context.

Facing vicarious traumatization requires a specific reflective work [7]. I found self-help in my own art making and support in supervision and intervention with peers. Doing my best to bring my capabilities to people in great difficulty was repairing and empowering for them and for myself. All of us, we need to foster resilience.

Beauty in Prison: Nature and Culture

In my 12 years long experience of working with prisoners, I mostly used the Carl Rogers humanistic person centered approach in therapy [8]. I offered them a quiet and safe space & time - a rarity in prison - and free choice of themes and of simple and easy available materials: gouache painting, inks, drawing, collage, clay modeling, writing. I showed art books and magazines, I helped them when needed with technical assistance, I explained why and how art is important. A great majority never imagined finding interest in making art. Some enjoyed drawing as kids or in school. Prisoners with long sentence sometimes used art making as a full-day occupation and were happy to show their creations. Some were skilled, a few were professional artists...

Unexpectedly, art making sometimes brought deep impact. I remember a man who painted a marine landscape in a symmetric perspective with two mountains of the same form and height on the left and the right side of the paper. It was pretty good, I told him, a nice day-dream of the sea as a symbol of escape and freedom. But he was not satisfied with his work without being able to formulate the reason. In the next workshop, he made a similar landscape but the mountains were asymmetric, one bigger, the other smaller and placed in a diagonal perspective. He told me he found this much better. I agreed and explained him the difference between horizontal/vertical and crossed-diagonals orientations in perspective and composition, with more dynamic visual effect in the second case. He listened attentively and then asked me why I didn't tell him this from the beginning, it would have save time...I replied that I thought it was better to search by himself - as I would not be there when he would move away, so he needed to feel and to be autonomous - and I added that obviously he was able to manage it. I will never forget his happy gaze at that moment. Later he told me that he has been placed in a foster family with his elder brother at the age of 2...He thanked me and said good-bye « in advance » (for security reasons prisoners never know the date they will leave, sometimes they « disappear » without the possibility to prepare the separation). Sometimes I am wondering how he is doing now, twenty years later...

In this context, proposing to consider beauty through art might seem odd - yet it is highly meaningful. In collaboration with a colleague, we organized a 12 sessions protocole using art & writing with a group of 10 male prisoners. We were 3 women leading the workshop: my colleague, myself and a student. This

brought balance to the lack of gender mixity in prison. We actively participated in creating together, thus implementing relationships based on empathic creativity. The workshop was successful in both process and products. A self-edited booklet closed the activity as a testimonial of our creative cooperation. Here are a few illustrations.

Figure 1. « The Milky Way » is a big size fresque on paper realized by the participants turning around the paper placed on a big table. Sitting in silence to contemplate it, then finding a title and writing on feelings was a demonstration of how day-dreaming and meditation are healing. Admiring a starry summer night sky is impossible in prison - but connection with nature is a universal need for humans. Art is able to fulfill it through imagination and metaphors.



Figure 1: The Milky Way - group painting, gouache on paper, 300 x 70 cm.

Another proposal was centered on cultural experience. We first created a group art piece starting with the question: « What does Mona Lisa tell us? » (Figure 2), followed by a personal interpretation of Mona Lisa as a symbol of beauty (Figure 3). Each participant got a copy of the painting. None of them ever visited the Louvre Museum nor saw Leonardo da Vinci's most famous work. All found the theme exhilarating. Humor, sadness, love and frustration were expressed in paintings and writings, shared in the group discussion and reflection.

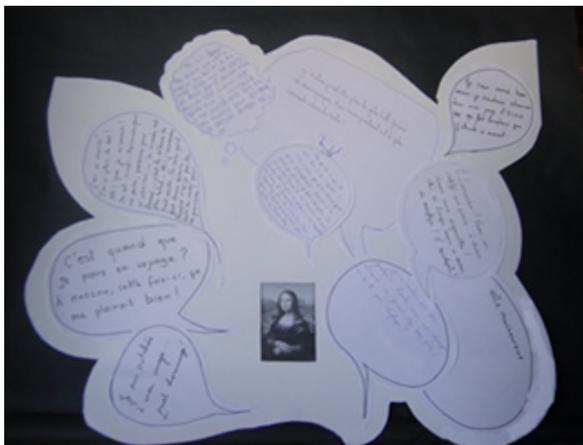


Figure 2: « What Mona Lisa is saying to us? » group work - writing and collage.

Another example of the expressive power of art making is the group work on the beauty of gardens (Figure 4a and 4b). Groups of 4 participants were invited to create each one « their » garden

and meet in the center in a harmonious way. One of these art pièces figured a beautiful garden - but the central meeting point showed a drowning character desperately trying to survive... We chose this image for the cover of our book. Each prisoner got 2 copies, one to keep, one to offer. They were so proud!



Figure 3: « My Mona Lisa » - Individual Group. art interpretation and writing.



Figure 4a: « The Fountain ». **Figure 4b:** « The Fountain - detail ».

Conclusion

Prisoners' creativity prove how adversity can deepen, broaden and sharpen human capabilities if only we offer tools of repair, resilience and growing to those who so much need help. Art and art therapy are universal, non-verbal and accessible methods in all - even extreme - conditions. Empathic creativity is the shortest way for connection and care. How can we convince policy makers to spend money on a humanistic approach for prisoners? By spreading knowledge on the complexity of the roots of violence, on the ambivalence of human behaviour, on the necessity of education and prevention, we can fulfil an important mission for all those who wish a more peaceful world. As an artist and art therapist I feel committed to contribute by offering a space & time for Beauty - everywhere.

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