

“Do not confuse motion and progress. A rocking horse keeps moving but does not make any progress.” Alfred A. Montapert [1]. As a visual artist, it can become very easy to work, re-work and over work our art. This process seems to happen from a basic need to reach some form of perfection in our mind; but why?

This phenomenon of perfection can be linked to the feeling of desire. Which has been described by Doctor Sigmund Freud [2] world renowned psychologist, as an act of our unconscious motivation [3]. This act of desire is a primal instinct that has evolved from the basic need to express oneself.

Sigmund Freud has described this basic need to express oneself as a behavior or an impulse that has been repressed to an unconscious state [4]. It is in this unconscious state that Sigmund Freud believed our true desires are controlled. As artist, it is this link to our unconscious mind that we find our struggle to communicate our true thoughts through our art.

The basic need to express a feeling or message through art has been the key to many great works of art; or has it? It was Leonardo da Vinci [5] that was said to express this famous quote “Art is never done; only abandoned.” Many great artists seem to follow this same way of thinking. Many artists seem to be uneasy by the thought of showing their work before they deem the work as done. This act of abandonment seems to be the only way to finalize a work of art, yet to what extreme?

Many artists have a hard time walking away from a piece of work because of a strong want to resolute the work of art. However, could it be unconsciously- the want to express a clear message over shadows the ability to walk away. Which begs the question, **“Does the need to make art lie within a vain of consciousness of our ever-waking mind, or is it as Sigmund Freud has described. As a link within our unconscious motivation which is linked to our desire to communicate though our unconsciousness mind?”**

To understand this question better we must understand Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious mind [6]. Sigmund Freud states that we have a conscious mind [7] and an unconscious mind [8] that helps us make our decisions [9]. In this process of deciding Sigmund Freud has stated:

“When deciding of minor importance, I have always found it advantageous to consider all the pros and cons. In vital matters, however such as the choice of a mate or a profession the decision should come from the unconscious from somewhere within ourselves...”

In this statement, Sigmund Freud expresses the need for both the conscious and unconscious mind. Which means that while we are fully aware of what is going on in the conscious mind, we may not have any idea of what information is stored in the unconscious mind. It is this battle between our conscious and unconscious mind that leads to emotional confliction [10]. When this emotional confliction happens, there is an unclear message within our brain.

It is this internal confliction that has brought me to search for a better understanding of how we as artists deal with the need to always work or re-work a piece of art. This unclear message seems to happen mostly when an artist is over invested in his/her work. It is only when we detach ourselves from the work, are we able to show our work.

With Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious mind and quotes from Montapert and Leonardo fresh in my mind, I started to look at my own work. It seemed to be, that not until I could separate myself from my work was I able to walk away from my art. Yet to do this, I had to find a way to reinvent myself; I had to abandon who I was and create a new façade [11] to help me walk away from a piece of work.

This reinvention of oneself seems to be a way to not only cope with the ever-needing want to express oneself, but to accept that art work may never be completed by the artist, nor completed by the viewer. It was this understanding that allowed me to make a link to many other artists which have done similar by reinventing themselves under a pseudo name [13] or by having a detachment to their work.

One of the most famous photographers that I found that did this was Endre Ernő Friedmann [12] better known as Robert Capa. It was not until Friedmann changed his name to Robert Capa was he able to work as a successful photographer. Even though Endre Ernő Friedmann only changed his name to help sell his work. It was his ability to change his way of thinking and become this new identity that allowed him to become successful. As Robert Capa he could become a working photographer that was always a way taken photos and no one ever could contact him.

Not every artist finds this need to self-identify with a new persona, like Eddie Adams [14] who spent most of his years photographing in a similar style like Robert Capa. Yet this did not come without a cost to Eddie Adams psyche. Eddie Adams was said to feel a disconnect from his work. In an interview where Eddie Adams talks about one of his famous photographs titled “The Saigon Execution Photo [15]” he was quoted as saying. “I saw a man get killed, I thought nothing of it...in fact after I dropped off the film I went to lunch.”

It is this type of disconnect from one's work that Robert Capa and myself seem to strive to achieve. It seems to be only when we truly abandon this primal need to connect with our work. Eddie Adams seemed to do this by not allowing his subject or his unconscious mind to cross paths. This allowed him to have a true disconnect from his work. Yet there is something to be said about having a close attachment to one's work; like the work of Sally Mann [16] in “Proud flesh” [17].

Sally Mann's work is filled with connections unlike Robert Capa or Eddie Adams. Sally Mann's self-identifies with her own work. In all her work, one sees her marks that have been unintentionally left behind. In Proud flesh [17], one can see the work of the artist in each image.

This is obviously the work of the unconscious mind at play. Without thinking about her process Sally Mann ingrains, herself in her final work. This is because Sally Mann does not plan where or how she will ingrain herself in the work. This act of unconsciousness is understood by Sally Mann as she describes her processes in an interview with ART21 [18] where she states “My plates are flawed-but it is the flaws that I like”

When asked why she worked the way she does Sally Mann responded “The process of making all those photos was based on a question of what remains.” This strong statement suggests a strong connection to her unconscious mind.

Sally Mann has seemed to connect with a deeper understanding of her unconscious mind. This connection has allowed her to produce work that is not only stunning to look at, but is powerful in subject matter. Sally Mann shows a powerful connection to her unconscious mind; unlike that berth taking work of Robert Capa or Eddie Adams where they find a way to disconnect from their work.

Similar to Robert Capa, I work better when I use a fictitious name. This façade I use allows me to act and work outside of my comfort zone. Giving me the ability to not only do things I would not try otherwise. It gives me the confidence to explore new ideas. I have found that having a façade is the best way for me to disconnect from my work. This is because unlike Eddie Adams, I cannot disconnect from my subject matter; I always have an emotional conflict with my work. Yet much like Sally Mann, I want the viewer to see me in the art I produce. So when I am working; I am working as myself and when I am done, I put up my false wall. This allows me to endure the Emotional conflict I may have.

Which brings me to the conclusion that as artist the constant battle between the conscious mind and the unconscious mind will always be relevant to each artist. It is the way we choose to deal with it that will affect the way we work. ” Alfred A. Montapert said it the best when he said “Nobody ever did, or ever will, escape the consequences of his choice.”

Foot Note:

- [1] Alfred A. Montapert was an Author from the 19th century who wrote many books including The Supreme Philosophy of Man
- [2] Sigmund Freud was an Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis,
- [3] Unconscious motivation plays a prominent role in Sigmund Freud's theories of human behavior. According to Freud and his followers, most human behavior is the result of desires, impulses, and memories that have been repressed into an unconscious state, yet still influence actions.
- [4] In Freud's psychoanalytic theory of personality, the unconscious mind is a reservoir of feelings, thoughts, urges, and memories that outside of our conscious awareness. Most of the contents of the unconscious are unacceptable or unpleasant, such as feelings of pain, anxiety, or conflict.
- [5] Leonardo da Vinci or simply Leonardo (15 April 1452 – 2 May 1519), was an Italian polymath whose areas of interest all arts. He has been variously called the father of paleontology, ichnology, and architecture, and is widely considered one of the greatest painters of all time. Sometimes credited with many inventions.
- [6] Theory unconscious mind: In this theory, Freud divided the mind into the conscious and the unconscious mind. Each is charged with deferent responsibility. Later Freud divided the mind into the id (or instincts and drive) and the superego (or conscience).
- [7] Conscious mind, which consists of all the mental processes of which we are aware, and this is seen as the tip of the iceberg.
- [8] Unconscious mind: refers to the mental processes of which individuals make themselves unaware. The unconscious mind is a reservoir of feelings, thoughts, urges, and memories that outside of our conscious awareness... According to Freud, the unconscious continues to influence our behavior and experience, even though we are unaware of these underlying influences
- [9] Decision making is the process of making choices by identifying a decision, gathering information, and assessing alternative resolutions
- [19] Emotional conflict is the presence of different and opposing emotions relating to a situation that has recently taken place or is in the process of being unfolded.
- [11] façade an outward appearance that is maintained to conceal a less pleasant or creditable reality.
- [12] Endre Ernő Friedmann, or Robert Capa was a Hungarian war photographer and photo journalist, arguably the greatest combat and adventure photographer in history.
- [13] Pseudo means false, so they are suggesting that you use a "false name"
- [14] Eddie Adams was an American photographer and photojournalist noted for portraits of celebrities and politicians and for coverage of 13 wars. He won a Pulitzer Prize in 1969
- [15] The Saigon Execution Photo was a photo of Nguyễn Văn Lém (1931 or 1932 – 1 February 1968) was a member of the National Liberation Front who was summarily executed in Saigon by General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan during the Tet Offensive
- [16] Sally Mann is an American photographer, best known for her large black-and-white photographs—at first of her young children, then later of landscapes suggesting decay and death
- [17] proud flesh was a series depicting Sally man's dying husband from muscular dystrophy
- [18] Art21 is The only series on television to focus exclusively on contemporary visual art and artists in the U.S.