

The art of life adapting: drawing and healing.

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THE ART OF A LIFE ADAPTING: DRAWING AND HEALING

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Abstract

The author, a practice-led researcher and cultural producer, draws on his own experience of cancer treatment and his use of art as a way to make aspects visible. He relates this to the larger intersubjective and social questions of cancer as an overwhelming force affecting society. Approaches in art, including improvisation, are relevant to adaptation, a process which is necessary for living with cancer.

“An art that heals and protects its subject is a geography of scars.” Wendell Berry [1]

I was diagnosed with esophageal cancer on 23 August 2016. I had surgery 11 January 2017 and my treatment was completed 18 May 2017.

I am an artist researcher in the visual arts. Research of any kind assumes a level of control, of agency, not least in research through the practice of art, for new insights to be recognised and valued in relation to existing knowledge. Control, which might be called method, is assumed to be as important in arts research as it is in the sciences, even if that control is improvised (cf Douglas and Coessens [2]), intuitive or in some ways explores intentionally ceding control (cf Cage [3]). I believe what I learned from the experience of healing and protecting myself while following the treatment pathway offers a different quality of relationship between patient and disease that has a bearing on cancer as a research subject.

In cancer treatment control is a problematic concept. The forms of action possible are specific. Control is ceded to technologies, specialists and institutional processes. The cancer patient is constrained, responding rather than initiating, following rather than leading (cf Arendt [4]). My experience of cancer and its treatment challenged my understanding of control.

The cure for cancer does not necessarily mean the elimination of cancer but rather that, according to Macmillan Cancer Support [5], by 2040 almost a quarter of people aged 65 or older will be cancer survivors. This implies a level of coping, of living with and adjusting to a new set of circumstances---cancer and the scars of its treatment as an everyday constraint involving adaptation. Constraint and adaptation are different from control but form important parts of the artist's methods. Chris Dooks [6] discusses ‘bricolage’, ‘using materials at hand’ or ‘using limited means’ as a methodology in the context of illness. The metaphors we use for our relationship with cancer are primarily battle and fight metaphors, though we also use journey metaphors too [7]. Wendell Berry's statement is one in a series he wrote in a piece called ‘Damage’ reflecting on his relationship with his farm in Kentucky. The quote reminds us that healing and protecting leave scars and that these can be important if we choose to recognise them as such. Berry suggests that art can enable us to navigate and understand (be a geography) of these scars. The art he is talking about is making healing visible as a means of learning about the battle. His construction doesn't deny the

fight, but focuses on the value of the evidence of healing and adaptation.

To understand how art can work in these circumstances we might turn to the collaborating artists Helen Mayer Harrison (1927-2018) and Newton Harrison (b. 1932), known as ‘the Harrisons’ and widely regarded as pioneers of ecological art. They frame our current relationship to the environment through the concept of the ‘force majeure’. The ‘force majeure’ is an irresistible compulsion or superior strength to which the only response is adaptation. By the ‘force majeure’ the Harrisons mean the combination of sea level rise, heatwave and extinction, which are the collective impacts of human induced environmental change. They suggest, in the context of the ‘force majeure’ [8],

“...a transformation can happen that will open pathways for human created systems to yield autonomy and accept limitations. An acceptance that will permit the formation of processes of nesting within nesting that will enable nature's ways of invention and human ways of invention presently so oppositional to co-join.”

This refers to the fundamental shift required in human consciousness from assuming the primacy of human action i.e. control, to accommodating and adjusting to the various ways in which the environment ‘speaks’ back.

Cancer has been a force majeure for this researcher. It is a force majeure for public health. Art has a role in the process of adapting.

II

I developed three responses to cancer.

The first takes the form of humour, the second addresses anger, and the third seeks to represent the ‘journey’. These responses are not in themselves significant, but do speak to accepting a ‘force majeure’.

In going through chemotherapy I framed the process as being like The Joker's origin story in the Batman comics and films. The Joker falls into a vat of toxic chemicals and instead of dying, comes back funnier and more indestructible. It is not exactly groundbreaking, but dark humour can be important as a mantra or focus for belief.

Fig. 1: Drawing 2016. Pen (Sharpie), Found Object, Sculptural Object. ©Chris Fremantle/Photo: Fergus Cnnor



I made a series of drawings which focus on articulating anger and finding a relationship with destruction. The first drawing (Fig. 1) focused on the symbolism associated with the esophagus in the body, the attention on it and the damage involved in the cancer. It was done as a way to work with anger.

The second drawing (Fig. 2) was made when the first was completed – I placed the Sharpies I had used for the first drawing between two sheets of paper and boards. I made the drawing by jumping up and down focusing my anger on the act of destroying the pens I had used to make the first drawing. I had already intentionally damaged the first drawing with a small stone sculptural object. With this second drawing I then glued the detritus of broken pens to the paper in order to hold the moment of anger in place.

Fig. 2: Drawing 2 2017. Sharpie, Glue. ©Chris Fremantle/Photo: Fergus Connor



With the third drawing (Fig. 3) I repeated the process with more of the pens used in the first drawing but then removed the broken pens, outlining the locations of the fragments with randomly selected other drawing implements (pencils, black ink, black and red sharpies and white correction fluid). I was interested in these marks as a form of scar marking the evidence of destruction and removal.

Fig. 3: Drawing 3 2017. Sharpie, Pen, Ink, Correction Fluid, Graphite. Chris Fremantle/Photo: Fergus Connor



The role of anger and of destruction in the context of healthcare in particular is problematic. The treatment for cancer is deeply damaging but this is not acknowledged directly. Drawing, both meditative, repetitive drawing, as well as performative, cathartic drawing using the power of the body, can be a means to explore this process. This sequence of drawings is not complete. Further drawings are being made. These are increasingly intentionally exploring the representation of scars as the representation of healing.

One interpretation of the value of this work in healing is in terms of emotional regulation, but it has also resulted in more physical attention to image making itself.

Another work (currently in progress) involves macro photography of my scars. Walking artist Hamish Fulton has produced a number of books which unfold because the nature

of a walk is more than can be encompassed on a single page (cf Anne Moeglin-Delcroix [9] p. 11). I am exploring what my scars look like close up and how they can represent the journey. The unfolded space still does not and cannot encompass the cancer journey, but it can acknowledge scale, and the metaphor of unfolding is of course powerful.

III

Cancer is a force majeure: it and the medical treatments to address it have superior strength and are an irresistible compulsion for the individual, the community and for society. Understanding adaptation to living with cancer, including finding catharsis as well as dealing with the imposed journey, is critical for individuals, communities and also for society more widely. Claire Pentecost, writing in an environmental context [10] p. 17, speaks of the need for attention to five scales “the intimate, the local, the national, the continental and the global.” It is equally relevant to think about cancer at these five scales.

My experience of cancer offers the following insights:

My particular responses are less important than understanding the scale of personal, interpersonal and social dimensions. We know cancer takes over life (cf Delfanti and Iaconesi [11]). Adaptation is necessary to (re)connect different levels. Art can provide methods such as improvisation which can be useful to enable adaptation. Art can also to make visible, in particular with the idea that art can contribute to healing through transforming the scars into a geography – a means of navigation and understanding.

By grasping the experience through making art it became possible for me to follow the pathway self-consciously, to gain a degree of agency, not as ‘gaining control of’, but as ‘a working with’ the situation.

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References and Notes

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