

The Art Life



The Editor posed the question of how I, as a writer, have managed to pursue my creativity in the vacuum of Covid-19. I realised that I have not. Instead I have allowed a malaise to creep in through the side door, rendering my creative output this past year negligible.

But lately I have found one sliver of light that offers potential redemption.

I was watching a documentary on the artist and auteur director, David Lynch – he of *Twin Peaks* and *Eraserhead* fame. I once had a conversation with my mother about *Twin Peaks*. She could not understand what all the fuss was about it; I endeavoured to explain the show, and I foundered on the rocks of Lynch's complexity.

My mother did not see the point of a show that so few people really understood. I told her that she had missed the point; *Twin Peaks* was not designed to be easily understood – indeed little effort had been made by Lynch to make it accessible to mainstream audiences. In fact, the term 'Lynchian' has become a by-word for critics and art essayists, to describe artistic phenomena that operate on a similar artistic resonance. Recently, for example, there has been a series on television called *Briarpatch*, which takes a well-worn plot of a woman returning to her childhood hometown to bury her murdered sister. This basic premise is then peppered with the kind of outlandish characters so beloved by David Lynch, together with quirky dialogue, iconic musical soundtrack, and the leitmotif of the odd appearance of various escaped zoo animals. These have the effect of lifting what could have been a rather banal re-tread of a hoary old tale into an interesting and amusing blackly comedic drama.

In the documentary, Lynch was discussing a book that had come into his possession as a young man. It was *The Art Spirit* by Robert Henri. This book taught how to live as an artist. It discussed various painting techniques, practical lessons on how to paint, of course... but more than that, it offered

insights as to how an artist may be true to themselves and to the pursuit of their art. As Lynch himself puts it, it is about creating, for the artist themselves, The Art Life.

Henri believed that every single person can be an artist. This may seem fanciful and utopian to some but, when one considers that he was formulating his ideas and philosophy in the early part of the 20th century, then one can see that his concept was truly revolutionary. In many Western societies at that time, Art and the pursuit of Art was deemed to be the sole province of an aristocratic, wealthy, cultured and educated elite. Henri, by contrast – inspired by Edouard Manet and the poet Walt Whitman – wanted paint to be “as real as mud, as the clods of horse-shit and snow, that froze on Broadway in the winter.” Of course wealthy patrons would like to collect fledgeling artists and set them up in studios and give them commissions, but precious few of them allowed the artist to work and create outside the boundaries that the patron themselves set. Indeed, the very concept of an artist, regularly signing their own work, only occurred comparatively late in the history of Western art.

I bought the book as soon as I could. The format it is written in – a disparate selection of lecture notes, articles and critiques – presents a challenge. The lack of a single narrative and apparent order to the text, with its many repetitions, makes it difficult for even the most committed reader. However, after reading the passages, pausing, then re-reading certain selected elements, I was inspired by Henri’s passion, enthusiasm and provocative challenge to the nascent student artist.

I would argue that we need difficult and challenging art to provoke and to stimulate; to move the genre forward and enable audiences to listen to the old stories, told in new and interesting ways, that serve to add fresh layers of insight and perspective to our collective ideas and our thinking. Our art moves progressively forward, at times uneven and stuttering; at other times in dizzying leaps. It is only by imbuing ourselves fully as artists, with Robert Henri’s Art Spirit, that we can live the Art Life.

It invites me to consider my own pursuit of writing, and the inherent need and desire I have to write, and then to share with other people what I have written. The absence of the opportunities to do that has become more deeply felt the longer that the Covid-19 crisis has continued.

To this end, I hope to re-dedicate my life post-pandemic towards the Art Spirit, and maybe – just maybe, I may one day live the Art Life.

But only if I am brave enough.

John Llewellyn James