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 experience of cancer treatment and his use of art as a way to make hidden features 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 that is necessary for living with cancer.

An art that heals and protects its subject is a geography of scars.

—Wendell Berry [1]

I

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 recognized 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 [2], intuitive or in some way explores the intentional ceding of control [3]. 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 [4]. My experience of cancer and its treatment challenged my understanding of control and led to new approaches to drawing, which, in turn, affected my thinking about cancer and its scars.

When researchers talk about the “cure for cancer,” this does not necessarily mean the elimination of cancer but rather that, according to Macmillan Cancer Support, by 2040 almost a quarter of people aged 65 or older will be cancer survivors [5]. 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 discusses bricolage, “using materials at hand” or “using limited means” as a methodology in the context of illness [6]. The metaphors used to characterize relationships with cancer are primarily battle and fight metaphors, although we use journey metaphors too [7].

Wendell Berry’s statement [8] is one in a series that appear in his essay “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 recognize them as such. Berry suggests that art can enable us to navigate and understand (be a geography) of these scars. The art he discusses 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 that are the collective impacts of human-induced environmental change. They suggest that, 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 [9].

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 humor, the second addresses anger through drawing 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 humor can be important as a mantra or focus for belief.

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 my anger.

I made the second drawing (Fig. 2) when the first was completed—I placed the Sharpie pens 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.

Fig. 1. Drawing 2016, pen (Sharpie), found object, sculptural object, 2016. (© Chris Fremantle. Photo: Fergus Connor.)
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.

With the third drawing (Fig. 3) I repeated the process with more of the pens used in the first drawing, but I then removed the broken pens, outlining the locations of the fragments with other drawing implements randomly selected (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.

The roles of anger and destruction in the context of healthcare in particular are 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. I am making further drawings. 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 that unfold, because the nature of a walk is more than can be encompassed on a single page [10]. 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 that address it have superior strength and are an irresistible compulsion for the individual, the community and 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 society more widely. Claire Pentecost, writing in an environmental context, speaks of the need for attention to five scales: “the intimate, the local, the national, the continental and the global” [11]. 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 interwoven scales of personal, interpersonal and social dimensions. We know cancer takes over life [12]. Successful adaptation involves (re)connecting different levels. Art can provide methods such as improvisation that can be useful to enable adaptation. Art can make experience visible in different ways, contributing to healing through transforming scars into geographies of shared experience—means of navigation and understanding.

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

Future work will explore methods of drawing (including using various technologies), its/their potential as a form of emotional regulation, subjectivity and intersubjectivity, particularly in relation to other practices (oncology) and autonomy in the context of external determinants.

Acknowledgment
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References and Notes
8. Wendell Berry in Kingsnorth [1].