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Perspectives on Practice:

The Artist in the Suit

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Abbreviated summary:

A reflection on the challenge of maintaining an artistic practice while pursuing a career as an arts manager in healthcare

Abstract:

Mary Grehan has spent most of her career as an arts manager bringing arts experiences into hospitals. Although an art college graduate, the demands of her early career quickly overtook her fledgling visual arts practice. Twelve years into her career she resurrected a creative practice in visual art before turning to writing and since that point has juggled the demands of both practices – the day job as an arts manager working in healthcare and the artist in the attic. In this article, she reflects on the different rhythms, cultures and challenges of both practices and how as an arts manager she brokers the relationship between artists and healthcare professionals. She also questions whether her creative practice shapes her as an arts manager.

Key words: Arts manager; writing; healthcare; hospitals; curatorship; arts practice

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In 1988, on the first day of my post-grad in Arts Administration Studies in University College Dublin (UCD), we, the students were asked to introduce ourselves. There were those in the class who had set up their own theatre companies. There were those who had organised arts festivals, and had worked in museums and galleries. As we progressed around the room, my twenty-two year old self began to panic. I wondered how I might embellish my limited experience of the working world to justify my place on this course. Did painting plinths for an exhibition count?

'Now Mary,' said the Course Director when it came to my turn. 'You are an artist.' (Was I? That was news to me. I was a recent graduate from the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) and from where I sat, there was a still long apprenticeship to be served if I was to be a professional artist.) 'If at the end of this year, you were offered a £15,000 a year job in the Arts Council' – (as if!) – 'Or a solo exhibition, which would you choose?' 'Oh I *know*,' chipped in the student beside me before I had a chance to defend myself. 'I know so many artists and they are *hopelessly* disorganised.' And there it was. My first day on my chosen path of a career in arts administration and already I was at a disadvantage. I was deemed to be an artist.

As it turned out, I was not hopelessly disorganised. Far from it. I completed a work placement in the Arts Council which impressed the relevant people and graduated with Distinction. What followed was a sequence of jobs as an arts manager and curator with various organisations, each job longer, marginally better paid and carrying more responsibility than the previous. As the demands of the 'day job' increased, my nascent visual arts practice diminished. By the time I was in my early thirties, I was managing an arts centre with a staff of twenty people, running international exchange programmes, and sitting on a range of Boards and voluntary committees. I had barely time to read a book. I quit the arts centre job after five years

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without another job to go to. There were no reserves of energy to plan for what I would do next. I had reached the end of a road.

My recovery, if that is what it was, was not as conscious or as choreographed as the word suggests. I went travelling around South America and when I returned, I took a part-time curating job in Oxford and enrolled in an MPhil in Dartington College of Arts. It was in Oxford that I joined a life-drawing class and picked up a pencil for the first time in ten years. I had not allowed myself to make art for a long time, telling myself I would be like an unfit athlete, frustrated by my new inability. But that life-drawing class felt like going home, returning to a part of myself I had denied for so long. The following year I moved to Waterford to take a job as Director of the Waterford Healing Arts Trust (WHAT). There, I set up a life drawing group that still runs today 17 years later. Three years after that I had a solo exhibition, my first. In 2008, I stopped painting and began writing a novel that was published by Penguin in 2013.

Writing quickly became a love affair for me and every day when I came to work I longed to be with my lover. My job as an arts manager was like my husband. We had been good to each other over the years and I felt a keen loyalty to him. But when the Director of Publicity with Penguin came to visit me in preparation for the release of my novel, I promised her I would do all the interviews and write all the articles she needed me to do. Fantasising about being the full-time writer, staying with the characters of my own making all day, every day, I resolved to do what I could to flog my book. I craved the time, space and isolation that I had run away from at the age of twenty-two when I graduated from NCAD and went into arts management. The Director of Publicity warned me not to get ahead of myself and how right she was! The year after publication was one of the biggest learning curves of my life to date. Yes, I was a published novelist. Yes, perhaps now, having turned up at my writing desk on a daily basis for five years in a row, I could call myself a

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professional artist and feel I had earned the title. But apart from the thousands of words written, deleted and rewritten, apart from the complex inner world born of the imagination, little changed on the outside, especially my bank balance. How would things have been, I asked myself, if I had stopped 'going out' to work, if my creativity became my livelihood. Would we still be lovers?

It is of interest to me how would-be dancers and doctors, lawyers and writers, who sat beside each other in primary school, have little opportunity to mix as adults. This is in part a question of economics. Artists' careers are precarious things and rarely does the financial reward (if any) reflect the effort involved. Spending time with like-minded individuals reaffirms our choices in life, even when or especially when those choices lead us down challenging paths. Working as I do now in an open plan office filled with healthcare professionals and project managers, whilst commissioning artists who work on a freelance basis, feels to me as though I am working between two tribes: the Tribe of the Artist and the Tribe of the Healthcare Professional. I broker the relationships, translate the language, explain to one side how things might look to the other, ask for something of one tribe on behalf of the other – money, artwork, patience, the benefit of the doubt. The list is long and in all this brokerage I am aware that I am most likely perceived as belonging more to the other side. To the healthcare professionals, I am 'the arty one'. To the artists, I am a person in a suit.

The problem with thinking in terms of 'them and us' is that it can prevent us really seeing and hearing the other. It presupposes the various stereotypes: the artist as the irresponsible individual who wants the freedom to fulfil their vision at any cost; the healthcare professional as a risk-averse bureaucrat who doesn't 'get' what the artist is trying to do. Artists don't have a monopoly on innovation and creativity and healthcare professionals are not the only ones concerned with managing risk. A few years ago, a nursing manager and

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I had a heated discussion when she wanted an artwork for a particular healthcare space but was not prepared to release what I believed was a very modest amount of funding to pay for it. 'Don't you think,' she said, 'that I would like the luxury of lying in bed in the mornings, of not having to be in work at 7am day in, day out?' To me she sounded exhausted and in love with the notion of being freed from the grind of the full-time job, as was I. Freedom equated precarity, I argued. Was she prepared to swap the effort of the job with the worry of paying the rent? Of course in all of this, my argument was more with myself than the nursing manager. I had not been brave / foolhardy enough to make that bid for 'freedom'.

But choices based on economics are only part of the picture. My work in the field of Arts in Health feeds me in many ways, socially, intellectually, ethically and more. It is an expression of my societal values and personality and is challenging and rewarding, frustrating and fascinating in equal measure. In terms of lifestyle, I have more in common with my public servant colleagues than full-time artists. What I share with artists is the challenge of living with the uncertainty of the creative process, unsure where it is taking me and doubting whether I'll be able to pull it off. The artist in me understands the need for time, space and tenacity.

The rhythm of my day job is different to my writing practice which takes place in a quiet place before / after work and with more intensity during stints in writing retreats. The day job gets broken down into a series of tasks achievable in 5 minutes or 5 hours, but calculable in advance, but writing is a meandering, seemingly never-ending chipping away and it can take days of continuous work to get into the zone. I have been working in healthcare so long now (19 years out of the past 30), that some days, in terms of the culture of the workplace, I think of myself as more a healthcare professional than an arts manager or artist. I have lost patience with the wordiness of the arts world. Working in hospitals has forced me to operate in the here and now

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when often the most productive meetings take place in corridors and the onus is on me to get to message quickly. The language is bullet-pointed and there are no prizes for lyrical prose!

My work in hospitals is about providing a range of arts experiences for the benefit of patients, staff and visitors and promoting the relationship between the arts, creativity and wellbeing, particularly in terms of social, societal, environmental and emotional health. I have often asked myself what is the relationship between my two selves – the public-facing promoter and coordinator and the artist in the attic. Are they two parallel tracks operating in separate allocations of time and (brain) space and when, if ever, do they come together?

My writing life exists despite my day job *and* because of it. It is in part driven by my own personal protest: a need to create time, space and autonomy for me and me alone; to be pro-actively selfish in a way that many mid-lifers desire; to set my own agenda free of the constraints of my day job. Much in the way that children create their own dens or private clubs away from the adults, I strive on a daily basis to protect that time in the attic for my imaginative life. The more I feed it, the more it demands to be fed. I shield my writing from others and avoid sharing it until it is at a reasonable stage of development. The energy that is required for doing the work can be expended on talking about it – that is my fear. When the words flow, it is a joy. But often I find myself holding my breath. It can be an anxious time trying to hold on to what is imagined, to get it down before it evaporates. This paradox of me as the anxious writer in the attic who by day promotes creativity as contributing to the reduction of stress is not lost on me. I curate a range of collaborative arts projects whereby the artist is asked to bring their whole practice – their studio-based work and the facilitation of others' creativity – into the mix. But do I? How does my creative practice shape me as an arts manager? Am I 'just the administrator'? Or an artist in a suit? There are moments in which the

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two connect, like when I facilitated creative writing workshops for nursing students as part of their reflective practice on placement as part of their reflective practice. But the real connection is more subtle than this. We bring the whole of ourselves into the office and the studio even though some parts of us are more vocal in one space than the other. Whilst there is no space for my fictional world in my day job and I have to work hard to protect that space in my personal life, it is through images and stories that I register the world around me. In the words of Julian Barnes (2012):

Novels tell us the most truth about life: ... What it is to be an individual, what it means to be part of a society, what it means to be alone...

Fiction is not the opposite to truth. Even in the culture of healthcare whereby evidence-based practice is the dominant discourse, narrative medicine is gaining traction. Becoming a writer has made me more aware of the importance of stories in making a case and giving insight, things that I have been doing as an arts manager in one way or another since I began, but my new relationship with writing – fiction and otherwise – now challenges me to develop a more authentic voice than generic (arts) management speak, and in so doing, to bring the whole of me, artist and all, into the office.

A graduate of NCAD, UCD and University of Central Lancashire, UK, Mary Grehan has spent most of her career curating public art and arts programmes in healthcare settings. As Curator of Children's Health Ireland, she is commissioning ambitious public artworks for the new children's hospital in Dublin. She was Director of the Waterford Healing Arts Trust (2002 - 2016), Director of Tallaght Community Arts Centre (1995 - 2000) and Curator of the National Maternity Hospital's Centenary Arts Programme (1994 - 1995). She also curated a programme of participatory public art in east Oxford, UK. She co-founded www.artsandhealth.ie in 2011 and Arts and Health Co-ordinators Ireland (AHCI) in 2003. Her Masters research (2004 / 5) was a comparative

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study between hospitals and galleries as sites for viewing art. She has published widely in the field of arts in health and her debut novel was published by Penguin Ireland in 2013.

Bibliography

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