

I thought that my disinclination to call myself an 'artist' was unique, or at the very least SOME sort of differentiator from other, *true* artists. Instead, through Tantrum's *Art About Not Making Art* (AANMA), I learned that discomfort around creational career nomenclature is actually pretty typical of its practitioners. Alas: I was not special after all.

As AANMA unfolded, I began to think more about why this aversion to the 'artist' title might be, and I think a lot of it has to do with the value our culture places on productivity. What could be less productive than art?

At a time when the differences between 'essential' and 'non-essential' sectors of our lives and communities have never been so widely scrutinised, it's funny that the pandemic's sudden removal of so much art from our leisure time has caused many of us to question what really is 'essential': and what it is we truly value about our communities and our time.

Spending a residency with other similarly displaced yet inquisitive artists (gag) as myself was an opportunity to dig more into these questions around values, around productivity, around development, and around identity.

Unlike other paid development opportunities for artists, the goal of AANMA was to produce nothing at all. Instead, we focused on the process of production and creation: we spent a lot of time reflecting on just how liberating this removal of expectation was. I realised that perhaps some of the shame around the 'artist' label comes from the fact that so much of how we spend our time is difficult to describe or replicate, and can come across as just downright odd. In a culture which places so much value on productivity over process, on information over reflection, and on conclusion over discussion, it makes sense that it feels shameful when the vast majority of your working time is spent just *thinking*.

In our first session together, we explored our surroundings: by wandering the grounds of the Tantrum studio and offices, we got deep into the ideas of sound, space, and sense. Even with brief instructions and a small area to explore, we all came back into the group with entirely different perspectives and ideas. I pondered the importance of place, and perhaps how working from home might have starved some parts of my brain and overwhelmed others.

When we came together again, we were tasked with a more structured challenge: to remake something we'd created before as many times as we

possibly could in the space of an hour. We worked independently of each other, feverishly labouring over our pieces, watching each one decline in originality and beauty as the time ticked over and our attention waned. The next phase of the task was to 'pitch' our artworks to a prospective buyer, causing us to reflect on the value of our work and the motivations behind it. In the context of COVID, with growing unemployment rates and the disappearance of so many work opportunities, it made me think more critically about the types of work available to us, and how realistic it is for any of us to be emotionally or personally invested in our careers when vocations (and indeed anything rooted in routine or normality) feel so precarious. Finding opportunities to earn money, let alone securing and keeping them, is a frantic and draining activity in itself. In the creative industries, employers (or, increasingly, contractors) don't just expect our time, but investment of personal energy and identity, forcing us to look at ourselves as a brand as opposed to an individual. The activity undermined just how exhausting unemployment and gig economy participation is, but it was also oddly reassuring to see that we all agreed. The session also highlighted for me one of the tiny positive aspects of the global pandemic: it feels like universal permission to be exhausted, instead of endlessly repeating to myself and anyone who will listen, "I don't know why I'm so tired..."

Our third session was probably the most fun but also the most exhausting: it was essentially two hours of playing. We engaged in improv games which sent us running, screaming, yoga-ing, singing, climbing, impersonating, and rolling around the studio. The games required us to be imaginative, but also attentive as we needed to listen to each other and respond to each other's ideas and energy. That the games were so much fun but also so exhausting spoke to my entire experience of isolation. While being locked away from friends and collaborators felt saddening and (not surprisingly) lonely at times, it also felt oddly liberating to have so much control around my social interactions. Socialising is tiring (as evidenced by that afternoon's session!) and the pandemic gave me a valid 'excuse' to enforce some of my personal boundaries around who I spend my time with and how much of it I feel I 'owe' to my friends and acquaintances.

For our final session together, we engaged in a more structured process of idea generation before regrouping to share our individual experiences and

ideas. For me, this process highlighted the importance of finding your own path. While there are lots of books and blogs and podcasts about the creative process, it is impossible to be entirely prescriptive about something which is so very personal. So while it's helpful to seek advice, what's best is knowing yourself and therefore how to integrate this advice into your own practice. No one can hand you a 'how-to' manual on your career or yourself: you have to create your own through the process of trying and failing.

Despite the fact that the opportunity was all about NOT making art, and about NOT being productive, I think that, in our own ways, we did make art and we were productive. The greatest value I personally took away from the experience and from the relationships was confidence in myself and in my approach to my work. Art doesn't fit into tidy metrics: it can be hard to gain enough confidence in yourself and what you're doing to see a project the entire way through for this exact reason.

It was wonderful to have a group of supportive individuals (and a beloved cultural institution at that) to sit with me throughout various creative processes, and to feel affirmed in the fact that what we do is valuable, despite the fact that much of what we do is invisible and cannot be counted or measured.