

# Engaging the Muse

*REFLECTIONS ON ART AND CREATIVITY*

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## *ABSTRACT*

J.L. Moreno's vision, practice and writing ranges widely but at the core there is always a philosophy of spontaneity and creativity. This essay reflects on the author's personal creative experiences, with Moreno's ideas as a guide. The Canon of Creativity, along with its implications for the two aspects of spontaneity training — deconserving and role training — is explored. The essay concludes with some stories and quotes from the lives of painters, to highlight the explosion of creativity and spontaneity that can occur in the moment.

## *KEY WORDS*

Moreno, spontaneity, creativity, canon of creativity, warm up, cultural conserve, psychodrama, role, art, role training, spontaneity training

## **Introduction**

Mid 2006 and I was gripped by an art project. I loved the shapes and colours I could make on my Tablet PC. I made sketches and put them on a blog: [www.thousandsketches.com](http://www.thousandsketches.com). The project became important to me. I followed my interest to the local galleries and then to the art museums of San Francisco and New York. I read art books and watched art videos. The world of art opened up in a new way. I tried to make sense of my creativity seizure and this led me to revisit the work of J.L. Moreno and his ideas about creativity and spontaneity. Here was an opportunity to develop my professional interest in Moreno and role training, and to bring some sanity to my exuberance. Conversely, I could explore what can be done when the flow of creativity diminishes, fades, flops and dies.

Can creativity be coached? What is art? Is talent innate? How is creativity coaching different from coaching in other fields such as sport and life? How is coaching related to role training? Art is creative when novelty is well executed. Moreno is inspiring because he believes in the genius in us all. We can move ourselves and others to be innovators in our time and context. That is the sort of creativity development I am drawn to. I have found Moreno's work instructive and inspiring in exploring these questions and I eagerly returned to his writings for some insight.

## 'The universe is infinite creativity' — Moreno

Moreno envisaged creativity as integral to the universe. Humans have creativity by virtue of being born in the universe and thus creativity itself lives within us. Yet not all of us are able to tap into our creative potential. What is the difference between those who create successfully and those who do not?

*What separates them is the spontaneity which, in the successful cases, enables the carriers to take full command of their resources, whereas the failures are at a loss with all their treasures; they suffer from deficiencies in their warming-up process. Creativity without spontaneity becomes lifeless; its living intensity increases and decreases in proportion to the amount of spontaneity in which it partakes. Spontaneity without creativity is empty and runs abortive. Spontaneity and creativity are thus categories of a different order; creativity belongs to the categories of substance — it is the arch substance — spontaneity to the categories of catalyzer — it is the arch catalyzer.*

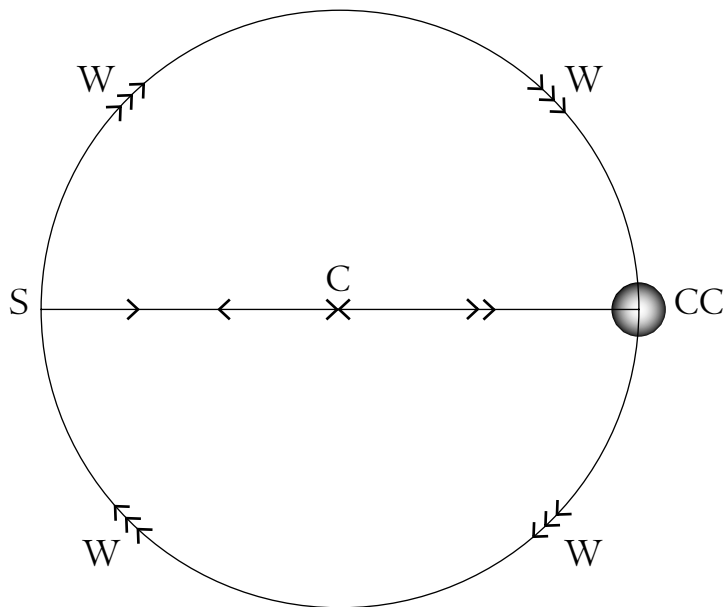
Moreno, 1953:39–40

This quotation, drawn from *Who Shall Survive*, describes the Canon of Creativity. I interpret Moreno's canon as a heritage of paths to creativity — on the one hand, our innate vitality and ability to be spontaneous beings and on the other, our artefacts, all that we have made, the tools we use, our alphabet, language and literature, all the items conserved in the culture. The inherited past, including art works and treasures, remains dull and dead until we come to it with spontaneity. Our cultural items cannot influence our creativity until we bring them back to life. We are automatons unless we are co-creators.

We know that art is in the eye of the beholder. Who is this beholder? It is us, who with spontaneity and involvement bring artworks and cultural treasures to life, and we in turn come to life. Moreno's diagram of the Canon of Creativity is a wheel, a circle, a cycle with creativity at the centre and specific pathways around and through it. Energy flies around the Canon of Creativity circle, the warm-up building as there is movement from cultural conserves to spontaneity and back to the conserves again. Thus creativity (C), to use the notation in Moreno's diagram and writing, is accessed through spontaneity (S). Spontaneity is the catalyst that enables creativity to emerge, to be expressed in the world. The vitally useful idea is that we can access creativity when we enter into the cycle. Note that there is no direct path from cultural conserve to

creativity. The only path is through a warm-up that results in spontaneity. Warm-up (W) leads to spontaneity, spontaneity leads to cultural conserves (CC) which in turn can lead to further warm-ups to spontaneity (S). And so the cycle continues...

**DIAGRAM: THE CANON OF CREATIVITY**  
**SPONTANEITY-CREATIVITY-CONSERVE**



*Feild of Rotating Operations Between  
 Spontaneity-Creativity-Cultural Conserve.*

Moreno, 1953:46

## Making Art

It is outrageous to think that we can make art, and even more so to think that we can help that process along. We think of an artwork as the product of a sacred and innate talent. To think of ourselves as artists may be strangely egotistical. Moreno's vision helps. Creativity *is* mysteriously innate and it does have a sacred depth. Far from being something for the lucky few, Moreno's perspective posits that this mysterious source can be released and flow through us through 'spontaneity training'. In other words, creativity can be released by means that are subject to our intentions and actions.

As well as defining spontaneity as the catalyst that activates creativity Moreno also writes of spontaneity as a state (Moreno, 1977:36), something that one is or becomes.

To become spontaneous is to move closer to that universal energy, a force that some find difficult to access and others are destroyed by.

*The difficulty is that one cannot store spontaneity, one either is spontaneous at a given moment or one is not. If spontaneity is such an important factor for the human world why is it so little developed? The answer is: we fear spontaneity, just like our ancestors in the jungle feared fire; they feared fire until they learned how to make it. Humans will fear spontaneity until they learn how to train it.*

Moreno, 1953:47

Fear hinders spontaneity. Fear prevents creativity. We feel fear for many reasons. Sometimes an experience of fear is useful. Sometimes it is the result of ignorance or the teachings of the culture, be it the larger collective culture or our social and cultural atoms. The path to creativity is to find a way through fear, to spontaneity. The sixties slogan, 'get out of your own way' comes to mind. We do not make art. We allow it.

## **What lights your fire? It is all in the warm-up.**

Warm-up is the doorway into the creativity cycle. I think of warm-up as being the extent to which a person or group is ready, willing and able to do a specific task. Moreno (1953:42) defined it as 'the operational expression of spontaneity'. My own warm-up is often related to the tools I use. In my journey of the thousand sketches, I created one sketch with the words 'the medium is the muse'. I love art shops. I love to see the rows of paint tubes, pencils in rosewood boxes, brushes, charcoal, bottles of coloured ink, pens — old ones and new felt pens, giant felt pens. The pull of a sheet of white paper or canvas is alluring, and crying out both to remain empty forever and to be sketched upon. Nice warm-up, but does it lead to creativity? Only if my spontaneity is activated and I move on to create art.

Engaging with art and artists is another way I warm up. I read about the painter Yves Klein, who painted in a blue that he patented and called International Klein Blue, IKB<sup>1</sup>. I watched the video. Then, without knowing what was in store for me, I wandered through the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) and suddenly beheld Klein's blue painting. It hurled itself at me, and took away my breath. There it was, an unbelievably vibrant Yves Klein international blue monochrome. Nice warm-up. Did it lead to creativity? Later, as I sketch I am not afraid to be minimal. I am bold. It appears that my spontaneity is activated and I move on to do a flurry of art work that day. Yes, I think CC led to S and then to C.

## **An Avalanche of Ghosts<sup>2</sup>**

Moreno (1977:101) describes two aspects of spontaneity training. One is deconserving, liberating us from conserves, and the other developing increased receptivity and readiness to the new.

*The greatest, longest, most difficult . . . war humankind has ever waged . . . It is a war we wage against ghosts, ghosts that have been called, and not without reason, the greatest makers of comfort and civilization . . . the cultural conserve, the robot.*

Moreno, 1977:44

All past creations, buildings, literature and art play a role in our warm-up. While Moreno emphasizes the power of the cultural conserve, he goes to some lengths to show that, by themselves, they are not the whole story.

*There are cultural conserves underlying all forms of creative activities — the alphabet conserve, the number conserve, the language conserve, and musical notations. These conserves determine our forms of creative expression. They may operate at one time as a disciplining force — at another time, as a hindrance.*

Moreno, 1953:40

More than a hindrance, conserves become the enemy in the biggest war we face. Conserves, clichés, injunctions, beliefs and teachings that were once progressive but are now useless, especially those that are readily replicated in the culture, sap creativity and freeze us in a dead past, or worse, actively lead us to act on assumptions irrelevant to creativity and all other needs. It does not have to be this way. As the Canon of Creativity diagram indicates, cultural conserves can lead to spontaneity if approached with a warm-up that arises from spontaneity. Attending to such conserves is part of the first phase of spontaneity training.

On reflection, I realize that my moment of awe in the San Francisco MOMA involved a preparation that led me to spot that Yves Klein painting. I had already researched and written about IKB. Then the blue led to the red on red on red Rothko across the hall, and next to that, the Franz Klein, which for more than a moment made me want to be an 'action painter'. I was moved by the sheer energy of these works of art to fight some ghosts. As a young boy, I was taught that these painters were charlatans, conmen, that anyone could paint like that. I heard my father's words. He was a house painter, and interested in fine art too. I can see him now talking about this as he cleaned the paint out of dirty brushes by splashing the wooden double doors of his workshop. Those doors looked wonderful to me. I suspect he thought so too, but he had been trained to dismiss any delight that he experienced in his paint splashes.

## Ready for the New

*Humans will fear spontaneity until they learn how to train it.*

Moreno, 1953:47

I will consider the value of role training as I have come to understand it<sup>3</sup>, as the second phase of spontaneity training. Ideas such as creativity, spontaneity and warm-up are

nothing until we receive them in a form, till they land on earth, come alive in a person. I quote from my Psychodrama thesis.

*The concept of 'role' is central to the methods developed by Moreno. His definition is that 'Role is the functioning form the individual takes in the specific moment he reacts to a specific situation in which other persons or objects are involved'. His next sentence is very important, and makes it clear that a role is not simply an event in the world but an act of symbol making on the part of the perceiver. 'The symbolic representation of this functioning form, perceived by the individual and others is called the role' (Moreno, 1977, p. IV).*

*To name a role well is an integration of art and science. A simple noun for the actor (e.g. fighter or lover) plus an adjective (such as cruel or brave) may be enough, but the true test of a good role description is if the naming does the job! To quote Moreno again: 'The function of the role is to enter the unconscious from the social world and bring shape and order to it' (Moreno, 1977, p. IV). Psychodrama is a way of concretising the otherwise elusive unconscious. Thus we use social or cultural forms to manifest the unconscious. 'A role is a unit of culture', says Moreno (1977, p. IV).*

*The Group and Its Protagonist, Logeman, 1999:4*

Role training includes exploration and role analysis. Roles that are absent can be developed, roles that are overdeveloped can be consciously attended to and transformed. Role conflict involving such things as unhelpful injunctions and guilt can be resolved. It helps to have a list of the roles required. Then, in situ, some of these may be already present, or not needed, while others may emerge in the moment. Role training is useful, for example, in the development of many professions and occupations, such as the parent, the airline pilot, the nurse and the psychodrama director. Coaching creativity is different and distinct from coaching skills because roles are not skills. They are whole ways of being in the moment. A list of named roles can be illuminating and permission giving. It can teach, inspire, motivate and lead to enactment.

## Roles of the Artist

Naming roles may be enough to get the artistic juices flowing. Here is a list.

- Hard Worker  
Perspiration, discipline, doing it. Write so many words a day. Face the blank canvas. Work at it.
- Idle Dreamer  
Forget work. Be. Know how to dream.

- Receptive Learner  
Diligence, read, watch, look, learn the ancient craft, learn techniques, respect masters.
- Naïve Enthusiast  
The story of the New York designer, Tibor Kalman, is illustrative. Kalman could not draw or design by any conventional standards, and yet he was a top designer for decades. His fresh naivety and ability to present his work, and to collaborate and manage a business, carried the day.
- Licensed Artist  
In the sense of having artistic licence. Able to give oneself permission to be in the art realm.
- Believer in Artistic Endeavour  
The artist puts art high on the list. The novelist J.B. Priestly wrote a book that he entitled, tongue in cheek, *I Had The Time*. This was in response to people who said they too would write if they had the time. As Eric Maisel says ‘put art first’<sup>4</sup>.
- Lunatic  
The artist needs the ability to hold strange experience, to go into the depths of despair and return to the heights of ecstasy. This is a dangerous mental path, and many fail. Successful artists usually manage to tolerate that madness for a while. A willingness to be in touch with angst, pain, trauma, mania, love, hate, despair are all part of life. Artists can put madness to good use — to be sensitive to the Zeitgeist through loss of ego — and they can return to sanity.

As I look back, I realise that my journey of ‘A Thousand Sketches’ was in fact a year of intense role training in some of these artist roles. I listened to stories about art. I read art books. I watched videos about art movements. Artists modelled many of the roles for me. I remember a powerful moment of learning when I read Eric Maisel’s encouragement to put art first, to work at creative projects when you are most able and ready. First! Before other essentials! That idea still shocks me. Yet as I write this very essay, I have plenty of other chores waiting. Their pressure on me is strong. I continue to write.

### The Brainstorm Goes On ...

Truth Teller, Outsider, Observer, Fringe Dweller, Fool, Believer in the Power of the Imagination, Egotist, Humble Hermit, Entrepreneur, Aesthete, Penniless Artist, Billionaire, Innovator, Hero, Arbitrator of Mass Hysteria. There many roles that may help produce art, including some social and practical ones that are needed to manage time, money and resources, knowledge of the culture, networks, marketing, techniques and organisation. They can be taught, coached and trained, and yes they will help the artist. They will lead to readiness to create.

There is no complete list that contains all the roles that are necessary or sufficient for artists. For every possible role, there is also a contrary or opposite way of being that might also be useful. By itself such a list is a conserve, and like all conserves only part of the process. Active engagement and creativity are needed. Yes, that may sound circular, but life is not a linear series of steps.

## Engaging the Muse

There is one small arrow in the Canon of Creativity diagram that I am pleased I noticed. There is the path from S to C and, additionally, an important arrow '←' from C to S. Spontaneity and creativity come together 'in the moment'. Creativity itself builds spontaneity which then builds creativity. The warm-ups are over and the heat is on. The artist is 'in the zone'. Artists often say that the art itself takes over. They watch it emerge along with the audience. Moreno places high value not on the past or future 'works' but on the work as it happens, now, in the moment, and this flow from C to S and back is all in one moment (Moreno, 1977:103).

The word 'training' may lead us to view the task of developing creativity too narrowly, more narrowly than intended by Moreno. At its roots spontaneity means 'from the self', and if the self partakes in the creative universe, the connection with those sources is more biological and psychological than social. The nature of the roles required will emerge through the creative act. The artist leaves the social world and enters the psychodramatic world, where, as on the psychodrama stage, all sorts of entities of the imagination, myth and dream are alive. Spirits are real and the concerns of the day-world are gone. In this twilight realm there is a truth unlike that of the scientist or the journalist. The artist touches on universals and meaning and struggles to hold their beauty and bring it back to see the day. It is there the artist meets their muse.

## Psychodramatic Moments

While there are artists who have never been to a psychodrama session, their stories often involve what we might call psychodramatic moments. What can their stories tell us about being creative?

James Hall, a Michelangelo scholar, wrote an imaginary conversation with the artist based on historical material. Here are 'Michelangelo's' words.

*I suppose you must be thinking of the poem we discussed earlier in which the speaker is a 'figure' enclosed within a great boulder on a mountain side. The stone block initially seems to be a kind of protective covering, like a hermit's cave. But then, against the man's will, the boulder rolls all the way down the mountainside, ending up in a 'low place' in a 'pile of stones.' Suddenly, he's thrust into the world, and the world presses in hard on all sides. Perhaps the rough stone surrounding St. Matthew is both protective and predatory.*

Hall, 2007:128



There are living entities in the stone. They come alive as Michelangelo reverses roles and breathes life into his world.

A moment that I think of as a role reversal is held in the beautiful phrase 'the desire of the line'. I first saw it as the title of a book of sketches by Ralph Hotere (2005) and then learnt that it was a quote from Henri Matisse<sup>5</sup>. The phrase evokes a living entity, one that we hear as well as see. The Hotere sketches encounter the line and her desire. A muse.

Marcel Duchamp exhibited 'Fountain', a porcelain urinal, and moved the boundary of what was understood by artistic endeavour. Here are some words by Duchamp (2008).

*I have forced myself to contradict myself in order to avoid conforming to my own taste.*

*The individual, as a person, as a brain, if you like, interests me more than what he or she makes, because I've noticed that most artists only repeat themselves.*

*The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds their contribution to the creative act.*

*I don't believe in art. I believe in artists.*

*Unless a picture shocks, it is nothing.*

As I read those words in the context of this essay I think Marcel Duchamp, through his thinking, feeling and acting, touches the sources of creativity.

Jackson Pollock dripped paint and delighted in the life and the flow of the paint. He let the paint do the work and helped build an innovative movement. He was ridiculed but he persisted. Was there a psychodrama at play? There is a well known story. Someone told Jackson that he should get out more and paint what he saw in nature. His famous response was 'I am nature'. He painted as he did because he was connected to his nature and he named it well. This was as a result of being fully alive as he watched his own dance, brush in hand. Jackson had found his spirit of creativity, his muse.

Andy Warhol seems a contrary artist to bring to this discussion. He mass produced art and wanted to be plastic, to be a machine. Nothing seems further from spontaneity than Warhol's mass produced everyday objects made in a factory. Here is a sample of outrageous quotes from Warhol (2008).

*I really do live for the future, because when I'm eating a box of candy, I can't wait to taste the last piece.*

*I love Los Angeles. I love Hollywood. They're beautiful. Everybody's plastic, but I love plastic. I want to be plastic.*

*If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, there I am. There's nothing behind it.*

*A lady friend of mine asked me, 'Well, what do you love most?' That's how I started painting money.*

*Art is what you can get away with.*

In the 1960s Warhol's words, art and life were shocking, not just to the cultural conservatives of the 1950s, but also to the more contemporary progressive ideas about art which were already conserved. I think he is in touch with himself, his work and the spirit of the times when he says 'I am a deeply superficial person'.

Were these artists lucky? Were they in the right place at the right time? Was it innate talent? Are these moments of newness simply a product of being functional? I think they entered, somehow, into the creative flow and once there, C met S. The world takes note. We are shocked and delighted, and at least in my case I feel the spontaneity rise in me in response.

## The Art of Psychodrama

Psychodramatic moments happen but with the advent of spontaneity training and psychodrama, we can bring a new level of consciousness to the process. Naming a role is a creative act. A good name for a role is accurate. Not just any clever name will do. It is to make a small poem, not only descriptive, but inspiring further warm up. The intertwined acts of role play, role reversal and role naming are an explosion of the catalyst and the creative substance. A few well placed words enliven the spirit of creativity. Art is a psychodrama. Psychodrama is an art, a creative process in its own right, its purpose to release the creative flow.

## ENDNOTES

1 Wikipedia, 3/6/08, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International\\_Klein\\_Blue](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Klein_Blue)

2 Moreno, 1977:45

3 My concept of role training was developed experientially in workshops during the 1980s, and was aided by the discipline outlined in Christopher Wainwright's unpublished paper 'Role Training' emphasising stages of mirroring and modelling.

4 Eric Maisel is the author of many books on Creativity Coaching. His website address is [www.ericmaisel.com](http://www.ericmaisel.com)

5 'One must always search for the desire of the line, where it wishes to enter or where to die away' (Henri Matisse, 1908, quoted in Hotere, 2005:1).

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