

Frida kahlo and niki de saint phalle comparison



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Introduction

Emotional sufferings are part of humans' life. People are overwhelmed by them leading to desperation or even to the acting out of these emotions in a destructive way. Finding a way to cope with these emotions is important. This could be done by various means playing music, doing sports and especially by doing art.

I choose the research question: " How do Frida Kahlo and Niki de Saint Phalle cope with their emotional sufferings by doing art?" because of two reasons. First of all, I researched artists who dealt with their emotions artistically. I became especially interested in Frida Kahlo an artist of Mexican origin as I am partly Mexican and thus can connect to her. Niki de Saint Phalle has been well-known to me as I have been in France for one year and heard about her famous shooting paintings. Secondly, I started to develop paintings resulting from emotional sufferings myself and became interested in the connection of emotions and their artistic expression.

Once I went to a vernissage organized by the " Malwerkstatt" of the " Asklepios Klinik in Göttingen". There I saw some paintings done by mentally hurt women who paint regularly. In the following weeks I spent some time in the " Malwerkstatt" interviewing them about their process of doing art, related feelings and resulting paintings. I became interested in their way of seeing art as a transformation of negative feelings into a piece of art. Doing art has a positive impact on their well-being. However, they cannot fully transform their sufferings into an expressive piece of art.

Frida Kahlo, Niki de Saint Phalle and the interviewed mentally hurt women realized the possibility of doing art as a constructive way to express their emotional sufferings. Frida Kahlo and Niki de Saint Phalle cope with their emotional sufferings to the last extent; going on stage not hiding any more but extricate themselves from expectations. The resulting creation can be seen as a mirror reflecting their inner-self which might be shocking and disapproving. The courage to create is one of the basic principles to start with. In order to cope with the sufferings fully the step these great artists did is essential. Freeing yourself not thinking about assessment anymore giving your sufferings an artistic voice will eventually be constructive and surely improve your emotional state.

The focus will be on the analysis and interpretation of the selected artworks in relation to the emotional sufferings expressed through it. Additionally, the transformation into a piece of art will be pointed out. Frida Kahlo's expression through paintings, especially self-portraits; stand in contrast to the three-dimensional artwork and shooting paintings done by Niki de Saint Phalle. One painting done by a mentally hurt woman will be taken into account for the analysis. Taking into consideration these two artists I aim to show their different artistic expressions, the creation of innovative, unconventional and evocative art.

Frida Kahlo

“ Frida is the only example in the history of art of an artist who tore open her chest and heart to reveal the biological truth of her feelings. The only woman who has expressed in her works an art of the feelings, functions, and creative power of women” said her husband Mexican muralist Diego Rivera.
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Frida Kahlo, an artist of Mexican-German origin, was born in Mexico in 1907. In her life she suffered from physical and emotional pain mainly due to a serious bus accident at the age of 18 that “ left her with lifelong incapacitating illnesses and a disintegrating body”. The metal bar of the bus skewed her body causing her spinal column and pelvis to break. Because of the destroyed uterus Frida could not give birth leading to desperation and loneliness, expressed in her self-portrait “ Henry Ford Hospital”. The physical pain she suffered from this incident marked a turning point in her perception of art. In bed-ridden she started to paint as an expression of her traumatic experiences. She recorded her emotional state in paint. During 1946 up to 1950 she underwent eight operations on her spin. Consequently, she confronted herself with thoughts about her own death visible in the painting “ The Dream”. The impact of the spinal trauma on her continuous sufferings is shown in her self-portrait entitled” The Broken column”. The coping of her sufferings by painting was the way to improve her well-being or even to keep her alive. Frida Kahlo transformed her emotions into a piece of art which tells her feelings honestly and open.

Especially in her lifetime she was one of the rare artists who were not afraid of expressing their emotions through art in such a heartbreaking and shocking way. Her style is dramatic and original. Frida mostly created self-portraits: “ I paint self-portraits because I am the person I know best. I paint my own reality.” Some of Frida ´s self-portraits show her crying, broken up and even bleeding. Frida had the courage to show her body, nude and sick. Her emotions were transformed into a painting, as they were; she wore her heart on canvas.

The Broken Column is a self-portrait of Frida Kahlo that shows her sufferings. It is like a X-ray picture from her broken spinal column. The ground color is a tone of yellow, brown and orange. In the foreground she is standing upright; paralyzed like a statue. Her nude body is shown from the hips upwards. Probably, she is not yet ready to expose herself completely nude as she covers the pubic area by holding a white blanket. However, it seems as if in one moment the blanket might fly away because she does not hold it strongly. The torso is split vertically into exactly two mirrored parts. Therefore, the middle part is symmetrical. Frida's spinal column is replaced with a broken column which as an ancient element refers back to her bus accident: the source of never ending pain. The spinal column makes it possible to stand upright and indicates self-confidence. It is of psychological and physical importance. Because of the broken column Frida should have lost stability. However, this is prevented by the steel corset. It is in form of a grid like prison bars which keeps the body together but at the same time imprisons her. Similar to the imprisonment by society values and the restricted freedom of movement. Although, being broken she keeps her attitude upright. The head is shifted to the right and supported by the column. By her visible right ear it seems as if she wants to hear something. Her facial expression is lifeless and sad. She is gazing and tears come out of the eyes that express her emotion of pain. The mouth is closed and the lips are slightly pressed together. The hair is loose which stands in contrast to the bounded body. Like in acupuncture the metallic nails of different sizes stick from all directions into her body, face and right side of the blanket. I know that in colloquial Spanish being nailed means "estar calvada". In the figurative sense it stands for being cheated on. The nails go back to the <https://assignbuster.com/frida-kahlo-and-niki-de-saint-phalle-comparison/>

relationship with her husband Diego Rivera and could refer to his infidelity. In the background a barren desert is shown which is broken up like her infertile body. The atmosphere conveyed by the desert reinforces her pain and loneliness. The horizon cuts the throat like the column divides the body. Frida is alone in the dry and rocky brownish landscape that stands in contrast to her wet tears.

The painting has a great impact on me. While taking a look at it for the first time I was overwhelmed and my body was tense. I had the impression of sharing the physical pain. This is because of the openness and brutality done to her body. By this painting Frida shows two sides. Her inner-self; broken, bleeding and her appearance hiding the pain by her upright posture and lifeless face “ mask”. To me Frida´s strong personality is well shown. I admire her for the courage to depict the pain in such an impressive way as to expose her vulnerability.

The painting “ The Dream” shows Frida lying in a wooden bed which floats in the clouds. A yellow blanket covers her body and two pillows are under her head. She is comfortable and has fallen into a deep sleep like the Sleeping Beauty. Her facial expression is calm and without any preoccupations she seems to be lost in her dream. Roots are spreading from the bed end over the whole bed and reaching up to the face having small leaves. A wooden board is fixed on top of the bed. On there a white papier mache skeleton lies like Frida Kahlo. The skeleton holds a bunch of flowers and firecracker are all over his body and legs.

This painting shows her willingness to confront with the hardest reality: the end of her human existence. Frida painted her own death as she underwent many serious operations leading to the confrontation of death each time. Frida expresses her death to the maximum by imagining herself as a skeleton. To some this might be extremely shocking to portray oneself already dead. Imagining your own death would be the last thing. To explain why Frida was able to paint her death one can look back to her Mexican origin. She was very much involved in Mexican traditions which includes the celebration of " Dia de los Muertos". On this day the welcoming of the dead is celebrated in a colourful way. This shows the fearless attitude Mexicans have towards death.

As I am of Mexican origin the connection to the Mexican culture is visible. Personally, I am not shocked because the skeleton does not look in a scary way. He rather seems to be smiling. Additionally, the luminescent and intense yellow coloured blanket makes me think of the power of light. Moreover, the blanket protects Frida's body from the thorny branches.

However, it seems as if the peaceful tranquillity of the dream can easily be interrupted. Only a spark is necessary to ignite the firecrackers. The painting would turn from a static to a dynamic one. On the right bottom corner the formation of darker clouds might indicate a weather change. Another interpretation could be that the background is meant symbolically. Frida is in heaven where she has gained the freedom from emotional sufferings.

The painting " Henry Ford Hospital" shows Frida lying naked and hemorrhaging up in bed. Her body is twisted with the legs bent and turned to

the right side. She covers her pubic bone. The white blanket is partly covered with her blood. Her left hand is close to the thumb and she holds strings which are connected to different symbols. The red cords " vein-like ribbons" are connected to six images that symbolize the source of pain and the impact they had on her fertility. The orchid symbolizes her femininity. As it is not integrated in her body the capability of giving birth is not given to her due to the accident. The snail represents the slowness of the miscarriage and is related to her sensation of passing time. In the left corner a machine can be seen which stand for the painful miscarriage due to the technical part of it.

In contrast to the bed shown in " The Dream" this bed seems to be rudimentary and it stands on brown soil. The bed frame is inscribed: on the length side " Henry Ford Hospital Detroit" and on the narrow side " Julio de 1932 F. K." In the background industrial facilities are shown. In combination with the blue greyish sky the depicted grief, desperation and loneliness is stressed. The depiction of these industrial facilities in Detroit could be connected to her bus accident as it was the modern technique being responsible for the accident to occur.

This painting is related to the emotion of grief and loneliness after her first miscarriage in the Henry Ford Hospital. The longing to have an own child was obsessive. She was desperately waiting for the baby. Thus the miscarriage hit her very hard. The loss led to a serious depression. " In this painting Frida depicts a powerful and coherent statement of inner and outer maternal fracture, loss, and agony."

I think that the torture she had to face is clearly expressed through this painting by her posture and blood. Frida writhes in pain. At first, I was confused why the bed is not in hospital but in a landscape without plants. Like in the "Broken Column" a brownish and dry landscape is shown on which no plants grow. I think that it stands for her incapability of giving birth. The bars of the bed can be related to the grid visible in the "Broken Column". Frida is imprisoned in hospital where she cannot escape from pain. The symbols matched to Frida make me think of a mind-map. However, everything shown cannot be understood at first glance. The symbols can be seen as a puzzle Frida gives to the viewer. A story is to be discovered.

Niki de Saint Phalle

Niki de Saint Phalle was born in France, Neuilly-Sur-Seine, in 1930. She was a French mixed-media artist and sculptor. Brought up in a conservative family and educated in monastery school Niki was confronted with the strict values held by society. The domestic position of wives was one of the main values that Niki rejected. However, she married young and gave birth to children. When she realized that she led a conventional life an inner conflict arose. Moreover, she had a trauma due to her being abused by her father. An aggression against men developed. Consequently, she had a nervous breakdown and got a treatment in hospital. Like Frida Kahlo she started to express her emotional state right after a serious health problem. After she had left her family behind her main focus became art. Niki de Saint Phalle joined the artist group called Nouveau Realistes in 1960. In the following, Niki created the assemblage "Portrait of my lover". In 1961 she created her first shooting paintings which made her well known around the world. They

were an open door for the recognition of her art works on an international level.

Niki de Saint Phalle "Portrait of my lover", created in 1961 shows a target, black tie and white shirt attached to a black board. Instead of a man's head a target is placed at which the visitors could throw arrows. On the black painted canvas a tie and a men's shirt is glued on. The shirt is covered with black droplets. Niki admired Jackson Pollock and could have been influenced by his actions paintings. Therefore, she might have applied great force by throwing the paint on the shirt. The throwing of the arrows is representative for the step to independence. The special feature of this artwork lies in the changed meaning of well-known objects to symbolize a human. Pieces of art created out of ready for use objects are called "Ready-Made". By this artwork she has was able to find "A fertile outlet for her ferocious rage toward men -and the dominant masculine art establishment - via the creative expression of violence.

Niki de Saint Phalle's performed the creation of her shooting paintings in public. All over the world shooting actions took place. One of these actions is depicted in the above shown photograph. She shocked society by her performance. She shot at a relief with paint so that all the paint spilled out and the painting was bleeding. Her way of doing art by shooting was new as it went against the traditional. The aggressive acts were meant symbolically. By shooting she released herself from the standards, "gained in a solid-middle class home and monastery school".

“ The artist secreted plastic bags filled with paint behind paintings, and sculptures; the bags burst when the works were shot by a gun held by Niki.” By the act of destruction Niki created a new painting. The dispersion of color plays a role in the spontaneous effect. It seems as if the painting is bleeding. By her shooting paintings she went on stage and showed to public that it is time for action. Not only to let her aggressions out she shot at the painting but as well to make the public aware of the brutal reality at that time. Wars and conflicts were the current issue. The shootings symbolize the power of killing. She acted in an aggressive way towards her pieces of art in the same way as society did with her and their opponents. The sacrificial death of the painting should be a warning to society.

Analysis

Frida Kahlo expressed her emotional sufferings comprehensibly through self-portraits. One can refer back to the sources of her pain. She portrayed herself as the victim of pain. The background supports the emotion.

Niki de Saint Phalle expressed her emotional sufferings in a completely different way. Rather than painting she made use of the role oppressor-victim by performing art. She was not the one suffering from pain but a women standing up fighting back in spite of society values. Niki wanted to be in the role of the aggressor not of the suppressed one. By shooting at it she seems like a beautiful Amazon. This was new for that time to see a women holding a gun in their hands and not being the calm and carrying household woman. Niki violated the traditional role of women. Furthermore, she freed herself from this role she did not to fit in. Niki shot with self-confidence, fearlessness and strength at the painting showing her superiority. She killed

the painting but at the same time gave birth to a new one. Death and rebirth are connected in a way that her expression became constructive instead of destructive. Trying to reach public by performing the shooting on a larger scale meaning on international shooting session shows the great step she did to make an appeal to others. Killing the painting was her way to get her aggression out. Finally, she reached to overcome and cope with her emotional sufferings by shooting and even more " I became addicted to shooting like one becomes addicted to a drug".

Blood appears in both of the artistic expressions either in painting as blood droplet out of a wound or as the painting being hurt and bleeding.

I was impressed by their courage to go that far in art as to show their own nude and sick body or acting violently by shooting. It is incredible as to what extent they had success. While researching and taking a look at their biographies I realized that both had a male artist who helped them to express. They were usually people who were right in society having a certain influence as a famous painter: Diego Rivera and Jean Tinguely.

By expressing art they went on stage not hiding their feelings anymore but choosing a direct confrontation with these. They do not want or can escape any longer.

I became interested in the fact that if other people not being artists can cope with their emotional sufferings by doing art. To get an answer I went to the " Malwerksatt" in the " Asklepios Klinikum in Göttingen, Germany" where mentally hurt women do art once per week for about two hours. I interviewed them about their feelings, experiences with art and took a look <https://assignbuster.com/frida-kahlo-and-niki-de-saint-phalle-comparison/>

at their artworks. Eve Kaboth is in charge of the “ Malwerkstatt” and provides assistance in case of help but does not assess them in any way. This is especially important as it guarantees a free working atmosphere. The women having experienced loss, betrayal and suppression are trying to do art as to improve their well-being. Negative emotions are released leaving them relieved and happy. As to their paintings they mostly do them subconsciously without having a clear idea in mind but which will develop during the process. I took a look at one painting showing clowns covered by coloured oil pastels smashed on the paper. Usually they are afraid of portraying humans. They represent some kind of colourful dream world. A composition of colours in which the forms, lines and objects do not play a significant role. While painting they are relaxed and enjoy it.

This painting seems as if the woman is still hiding like the clowns shown in the picture. By this painting it is clear that she is not yet ready to go on stage. The impression I got is that they have not fully overcome the imprisonment by society and confronted themselves with their sufferings. Thus the step of showing everything openly, provocatively in order to fully cope with them is not yet reached.

Niki de Saint Phalle and Frida Kahlo, in contrast to the mentally hurt women, reached the highest point they could possibly reach by their expression. Doing art was not restricted by society anymore. Art is an expressive source the artists Niki de Saint Phalle and Frida Kahlo realized. With their moving art they freed themselves but not only this. They went a step further by breaking society values. Frida Kahlo drew herself bleeding, open and naked. Especially at that time when artists were not supposed to express

themselves in the painting as if they were the subject. Taking this into consideration one can see parallels to Niki as she was the first woman not being a victim but the aggressor. They realized that emotional sufferings can trigger creativity and be seen as a genesis source of new expressive art. But this is not at all easy to undergo. It requires courage and the refusal to run away from the inner self, unconscious and the unknown.

Conclusion

To answer the research question “ How do Frida Kahlo and Niki de Saint Phalle cope with their emotional sufferings by doing art?” I came to the conclusion that both, Frida Kahlo and Niki de Saint Phalle cope with their emotional sufferings by doing art in a different way. Frida Kahlo documented her emotional sufferings by painting, especially self-portraits. The extension of her is Niki de Saint Phalle whose action was art. She created shooting paintings.

Emotional sufferings can be beneficial and reinforce a development (out of a crisis new things are created). Without having these experiences and the related emotional sufferings this new expression of art would not have been created. Therefore emotional sufferings can be seen from positive point of view. “ Creativity, then, can in part be thought of as the capacity to express the demonic constructively. This is what all great artists do.”

Is there a limit to cope with emotional sufferings by doing art? When is it said not to be ethical?

On the one hand the shooting paintings helped Niki to cope with her sufferings but on the other hand she shocked society by her performance.
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But sometimes it can be good to draw people's attention to an issue by shocking them. I think that as long as no humans, animals and ethical principles are hurt by the art process it is legitimate.

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