

ART OR ARTIST?

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Recently I've been finding myself in conversations where I feel uncomfortable and a little bit wrong. At an art school, it's no surprise we talk about pop culture news pertaining to art, like the new collection by Viktor and Rolf, but some conversations take a darker turn. Someone will bring up an artist with quality work that will then be preceded by the terrible things this person does or has done like, for example, renewed interest in the sexual misconduct of R. Kelly.

I found myself the other day in one of these conversations. About R. Kelly, in fact. And I really did feel uncomfortable. Next to me was a girl who very seriously believes that we should not, at all, support or appreciate the work of artists who commit such crimes. Before I knew what was happening, I realized I was playing devil's advocate. I had never even listened to R. Kelly, and here I was defending his work. I didn't like the fact that Lady Gaga decided to delete her collaborated song off of Spotify in a very "cancel culture" declaration. Does deleting him in some way change what he's done? Or does it help to put it out of mind because it's out of sight?

On the other hand, another girl was sharing a recent experience in the classroom where she was presenting on an artist. She decided to mention his sexual abuse towards his family and the professor reacted by saying it was unnecessary to the discussion of his work. And in this situation, I found myself enraged that he would deny such a conversation.

So why do I constantly feel uncomfortable and a little bit wrong? Maybe it's because this idea of separation from art and artist is not black and white. Perhaps it is all a little bit wrong. It feels wrong to me that beautiful work gets tossed aside and wasted because of the horrible decisions of its maker. That's not the art's fault. Artists have always lived in the fringes of society where they aren't totally good in nature. But is their art good? I don't know.

On the other hand, it also feels wrong to me that we give monetary reward to people who have done such heinous things. They don't deserve to be rewarded in life for destroying someone else's. What if they're dead? Like David Bowie, who has recently been found as a statutory rapist. Also, the context of the times might play a huge role in what would be acceptable today versus then.

I also feel for the victims or survivors of such crimes. If we do not talk about such issues, we force their voices to the back, behind the voice of their abuser. They have to live with that reality every day as they see famous musicians, stars, fine artists or any other form thrive. It would break my heart to experience that. When I was young and first starting to write, my teacher always told me to never sit on the fence. To always and definitively pick a side and write a strong argument. For the most part, I am really good at this. Anyone who knows me, knows I like to have opinions—I have a lot. But in this specific conversation, I find I am on the fence, but I think that's okay. I can't deny the fact that I still enjoy the music of David Bowie, even if it makes me a little bit queasy. Oppositely, I can't stand to listen to BORNs anymore after what came out about him (and he was one of my top artists last year), even though I seriously miss his music.

As a woman, I feel it is my responsibility— to myself and to others— to stand by the side of the abused (female or otherwise). I constantly try to find ways to break stigmas and stereotypes surrounding sexual assault. I am repulsed by the idea of having people in our government be accused of such things. You might also feel the same, but then brush aside the fact that music or art isn't necessarily on the same level. I could argue otherwise. Politics and government are obviously important (so please make sure you're voting, thanks) but isn't it music and art and fashion that is creating our culture, political or otherwise? And if we are okay with our culture being riddled with abusers, aren't we subconsciously normalizing sexual assault? Again, I really don't know.

If you haven't given any thought to this issue, I would seriously consider asking yourself about it. I don't necessarily think there is a right or wrong answer. In fact, I think that either extreme does a disservice to the complexity and severity of the issue. Maybe the best you can do is recognize the problematic nature of appreciating art with or without the artist. Maybe awareness is enough. Don't delete the art, but also, don't delete the artist. And before you react too strongly either way, sit with the fact that either way, someone loses.