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Creative Mask Making

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Lecture presented at the International Conference about “Productive Orientation and Mental Health” on the Occasion of the 20th Anniversary of the International Erich Fromm Society, that took place October 29th to November 1st, 2005, in the Centro Evangelico in Magliaso near Lugano / Switzerland. First published in the English version of *Fromm Forum* (English Edition - ISBN 1437-1189) 10 / 2006, Tuebingen (Selbstverlag) 2006, pp. 49-51.

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For me (Jürgen Kalcher) our mask making approach started out in the mid 1980s, when my colleague, Otto Luedemann, invited me for the first time to join his international project on creativity. This project was part of a program of our Hamburg School of Social Work supported



by the French German Youth Office (DFJW/OFAJ); this means, it was from the beginning dedicated to the European dimension. With a group of about 20 participants, composed of German students and guests from France and Italy, we went for about five days to an old farm south of Hamburg that had been changed into a training centre. Far out of the city, Natale Panaro, sculptor and professional mask maker, introduced us to the skills of his art.

Although creating a mask from materials like paper and glue is primarily a matter of

individual skills, this creative act is strongly influenced and shaped by the very presence of others being interrelated within a group setting. The group dimension has always been included in our practical considerations.

There are roughly two different areas

of application. As both of us have been teachers in the Hamburg School of Social Work, the primary field is the education of social workers. Within this frame of reference the mask making group is understood as a social space, within which each student should make new experiences with his or her personal identity, moving on to a higher degree of creative thinking, skills and self awareness.

Applying the mask making method to social work practice is the second field where we have used this approach. Depending on respective



their masks have a lot to do with the way they are being perceived by themselves and by others. So you'll find masks representing the wish of their creators to be beautiful, smooth, socially desirable; on the other hand there are masks which are scaring their authors, but hide a very personal message for them.

Generally this message is closely connected with the special energy which inhabits the mask. Like in a mirror blowing up

needs of the client group and/or agency policy, our mask making approach can here be used in a more instrumental sense, serving as a social therapeutic or more precisely pedagogical means.

In both fields of application it is not our intention to just build „nice masks“. In other words it's not „l'art pour l'art“, but our main interest might be expressed by the following questions:

- The masks produced in our workshops, are they related to „social masks“ of their creators or, generally speaking, in social life?
- If so, does create mask making of one's own mask offer the chance to deal in a productive way with the increasing alienation existing in society?

Referring to the first question our students currently express their experience that, in deed,

certain aspects, the creators discover in their masks a strange or even an alienated view of themselves. They are living then the paradox to meet themselves as a stranger created by themselves. On the other hand, finding out words to express their feelings, going into the mask, trusting its energy and staging it, finally they live this experience as a liberation.





Connected to this we have been working on phenomena like distance and proximity, familiarity and alienation, oppression and poetry: All these aspects are included, for example in the following remarks by one of our former participants who had applied the mask making approach with prostitutes in Mexico:

„Making a mask is more than just expressing your feelings, even more than a therapeutic exercise. Shaping your own mask means, properly, you are recreating your being. The masks are revealing what is hidden and secret, but at the same time they are hiding for their part, delivering, terrifying, verbalizing, talking, dancing, announcing, weeping, crying, loving, dreaming; they are transforming us into expression, words, life...; they are accusing the women's poverty, the violence they have to endure, the non recognition of their rights and, consequently, the treatment as second class citizens.”

So what can be the advantages of expressing all these positive and negative, destructive or constructive reactions and projections? We think

that it helps people to take a productive orientation instead of remaining subject to the various constraints of the predominant social character.

In this sense mask making can be described as an

- autobiographical,
- narrative and
- creative

way for the individual to find a productive orientation

- It is an *autobiographical* way because to shape my mask means that not only my mind but first of all my hands, and through my hands my body, my whole being will be involved in this process.
- It is a *narrative* way because it will allow me to tell my own stories which I'm ready to share with others, and by so doing encouraging me to be different.
- It is a *creative* way because it opens up new chances to discover myself and the world and, in the end, as Fromm calls it, to be reborn.