



Almost There Discussion Guide

Directors: Dan Rybicky, Aaron Wickenden

Year: 2014

Time: 93 min

You might know these directors from:

This is the first full-length feature from this directorial team.

Aaron Wickenden was Editor on *The Interrupters*; *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*; *Finding Vivian Maier*; and *Best of Enemies*.

FILM SUMMARY

In the summer of 2006, directors Aaron Wickenden and Dan Rybicky set out from big-city Chicago for the small town of Whiting, Indiana, the host of Pierogi Fest, in order to film the festival's attempt to enter the record books with the world's largest pierogi. Little did they know that an aging man - and not a savory pastry - would capture their attention and satiate their appetite for a story of multiple layers.

They watched as senior citizen Peter Anton made portraits of festival-goers, which was completely captivating, but when he revealed his 12 scrapbooks - together entitled "Almost There" - the co-directors understood that something marvelous was at work within this quirky character. He told them, "One of the final goals for my life is to tell my story." They exchanged details, making plans to meet the artist at some point down the road.

Over the course of the next eight years, Dan and Aaron made countless trips to Peter's home in East Chicago, Indiana. What they reveal and subsequently capture on film is astonishing: a man nearing 80 living in the basement of his birth home, a crumbling, decrepit, soon-to-be condemned abode. The home provides a reflection of Peter's innate belief that true artists must suffer. This, coupled with a debilitating need to cling on to others for the most basic of needs, makes for the telling of the true tale of a living outsider artist.

Through these tales the directors reveal, both in the presence and absence of Peter, that nearly everyone involved in *ALMOST THERE* spends some amount of time caring for his well-being, although in Peter's mind, "You are serving me. I am serving you." As the depth and complication of this talented, chaotic man's life unveils itself, the directors are faced with difficult, heart-wrenching decisions. By the end, however, *ALMOST THERE* reaches the conclusion that redemption is available and the artistic path is a wonderful way there.

FILM THEMES

Peter Anton wanted to leave behind a legacy. Little did he know that by being discovered, the past and all its darkness would be brought into the light, painful at first but eventually giving way to redemption.

THE SUFFERING ARTIST

“The artist that suffers is common,” Peter states, echoing an old adage that has been passed down through the ages. Art consumers are quick to focus on the pain and personal despair of the masters, and for many (including the artists themselves), true art is only achievable through the channel of hardship. Peter’s living conditions served as a reminder and arguably a comfort that he was living the artist’s life, pursuing the road to greatness. After all an undying need to tell his story was ever-present in his bones, and as long as he bowed down before the altar of pain and suffering, the closer he approached a more genius tale.

OUTSIDER ART

“Art brut,” or outsider art in English, is a fairly new field of art, setting out to recognize those sidelined from the mainstream, those who have never had anything (or much at all) to do with the well-established art world. Peter Anton, in the words of INTUIT gallery director Cleo Wilson, “is the real deal,” a pertinent example of what it means to be living and working as an outsider artist. By documenting an epoch in his abundantly prolific, chaotically scattered artistic existence, *ALMOST THERE* serves as an educational escapade into the field of this not widely understood genre.

CO-DEPENDENCY AND CARETAKING

Eve Gomez, Dan McKern, Shelby Withrow, Aaron Wickenden, Dan Rybicky, and countless others served Peter Anton. They provided him with food, art supplies, clothing, even shelter – everything he deemed essential. With a great knack for attracting caretakers into his life, Peter enabled himself – and was enabled by his community of carers – to never truly grow up, to never take full responsibility for his existence. When one helper backed off, he filled the void with yet another, perpetuating a cycle of helplessness and lack of personal responsibility. Peter actively chose to live his life in a passive manner – waiting for someone else to pick up the practical pieces – raising the alarm for those who questioned when to draw the line and when to serve compassionately.

REDEMPTION

Peter wanted to be discovered, to leave behind a legacy, maintaining his dark secretive existence all the while. But through the process of uncovering his art, the filmmakers unearthed facts Peter hoped were now dead and buried. Once he was forced to own up to his past, only then could true redemption – and a true living artistic legacy – become a reality. The next step, moving out of his house and away from old patterns and habits, away from the darkness of his existence, enabled Peter to shine a light on the bright parts of his existence. By opening the door to the outside world and allowing honesty to have its way, Peter could make peace with the past, redeem himself of his wrongdoings, and be open to a future of possibility and a split with the suffering.

“You learn from suffering, from your mistakes, from your past. It’s called fortitude.”

Peter Anton

“I think Peter is the real deal, that he’s somebody working outside the mainstream.”

Cleo Wilson, Director of INTUIT

“I believe that people never lie to other people. They lie to themselves.”

Dan Rybicky, *ALMOST THERE* Director

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Describe ALMOST THERE in five words. What was the film’s greatest strength, and greatest weakness?
2. Discuss Peter Anton’s art that was displayed during the course of the film. Do you consider him a talented artist?
3. What is your definition of talent/artistic ability?
4. Had you heard of the “outsider art” genre before watching the film? Do you think that Peter Anton qualifies as a good example of an outsider artist?
5. Did you feel the parallel stories the directors introduced at points - concerning other character’s experiences with mental illness, caretaking, etc. - distracted from or added to the story of Peter Anton?
6. Do you have any experience of caretaking for another individual? If so, discuss. When is the line between aiding and enabling crossed?
7. Discuss your reaction to the revelation of Anton’s suspicious activity in 1981. Should INTUIT have pulled his exhibition, once they learned of this fact?
8. Discuss the notion of repentance. Are all past events forgivable? Have you ever had to forgive someone or be forgiven for something difficult in your life? Do you feel it is possible for someone to truly move on into the future without having first rectified the past?
9. What do you make of the idea of the tortured artist as the only successful artist? Can true masterpieces come out of a healthy, happy life?
10. Do you feel a pressing desire to have your life story told, as Peter does? Do you have an ALMOST THERE somewhere within you? Is it an intrinsically human characteristic to want to leave behind a legacy?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- Co-directors Aaron Wickenden and Dan Rybicky went to the 2006 Pierogi Fest in Whiting, Indiana, to film its attempts at entering the “Guinness Book of World Records” with the world’s largest pierogi. They observed Peter Anton drawing portraits of festival attendees. Once he showed the directors his 12 scrapbooks entitled “Almost There” – which he had brought to the festival – Wickenden and Rybicky felt they had stumbled across something special.
- The film’s first screening – held for friends, subjects, and Kickstarter backers – was also held at the Pierogi Fest, eight years after the initial meeting.
- Director Wickenden has worked in the field of documentary editing and cinematography for a number of years, and has been with Kartemquin Films of Chicago since 2002. Director Rybicky, on the other hand, has worked as an artist (of photographs, installations, plays), screenwriter, and teacher, and teaches Cinema Art + Science at Columbia College, Chicago.
- INTUIT: The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, the gallery in Chicago where Anton held his first large-scale exhibition, was established in 1991. It continues to be the only non-profit in the U.S. displaying self-taught and outsider art.
- “Almost There: A Portrait of Peter Anton” ran from July 9 to December 30, 2010, at INTUIT.
- “Outsider art” was first coined in the English language in 1972 by art critic Roger Cardinal, a way of describing the field of art known as “art brut” (raw art) in French. Art brut was first mentioned by French artist Jean Dubuffet, who used the term to describe art created outside official culture, especially focusing on art by those living outside societal norms, such as patients in psychiatric institutions. The English term is not as narrow as art brut, and quite often “outsider art” is used as a catchall phrase to refer to self-taught artists who have little or no contact with the mainstream art world. Other categories of outsider art include non-traditional folk art and visionary art.
- The Outsider Art Fair is held in New York City and Paris, France every year.
- East Chicago, Indiana – where Peter Anton has called home for most of his life – had a 2010 population of 30,000. Named after its location east of Chicago, it has had a post office since 1889. The city is the home of Marktown, a planned community built in 1917 for workers at The Mark Manufacturing Company, a steel manufacturer. The median household income in East Chicago was \$26,000 in 2012, as compared to \$47,000 for the state of Indiana.
- ALMOST THERE officially premiered at DOCNYC in 2014.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Consider supporting INTUIT, “the only non-profit center in the United States that promotes outsider, intuitive and self-taught art,” also the gallery that first exhibited Peter Anton’s work. www.art.org
2. Kartemquin Films, the film’s production company, believe in supporting “film as a vehicle to deepen our understanding of society through everyday human drama.” Donate to their work in documentary film.
3. Caring.com provides support to caretakers, offering information on how to navigate the emotionally and physically challenging territory of caretaking. Learn more about their work.
4. Outsider art is gaining more and more widespread appeal. “Raw Vision” magazine – published since 1989 – has been helping to spread this appeal. Learn more at rawvision.com.

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