



Inside Out Community

The Secret Garden

A Symposium on Creativity & Wellbeing in Later Life

Our second annual symposium on arts and health 2017 explores the theme of whether active participation in the arts – be that singing, dance, drama, writing or one of the visual arts – can make a real & significant difference to wellbeing in final decades of life.

Two years ago Inside Out launched a programme – Creative Lives - for those over 60 experiencing the many emotional challenges of later life, including dementia. This is a weekly programme of creative workshops exploring mixed art forms led by practising local artists. We have yet to evaluate it fully but the indication from participants is that it is experienced as beneficial: it is a mental and social stimulus; it encourages creative expression; it brings something enriching, purposeful and enjoyable to life; and it involves people in a creative community group of which they feel a valued part.

There is a tendency to discount ourselves in later life – *'I'm too old'*; to disregard our abilities – *'I was always hopeless at art'*, and the possibility of a creative life closes down. What we have been interested in with our own project Creative Lives is to challenge these attitudes and provide an opportunity for artists & non artists to reconnect with their creativity and find an expression for it. We may all take inspiration from those gods of impressionism: Monet who painted the enormous lily pond canvases late in his life when his eyesight was failing; and Matisse who began an impressive new development in his artistic life with his cut outs when he was old and ill.

The active life is known to be the best antidote to the adversities of ageing; but active in what way? In a recent large scale survey conducted by Age UK *creative and cultural participation* scored highly as one of the many factors that contribute to sustained wellbeing.

Symposium Speakers

Jevan Watkins Jones: Artist & Gardener

Presentation Title **'People Plants and their Roots'**

Biography

Jevan Watkins-Jones works as an artist and gardener. He is an alumnus of the Royal Drawing School and has recently been studying with the Royal Horticultural Society with a bursary from the Professional Gardeners Trust. HRH Prince Charles once

remarked of his work, *'Very interesting, very ... blobby. Did you train?'* Jevan is best known for his long term collaborative drawing projects with communities such as 'Facing-Recovering' with injured soldiers, resulting in an exhibition that toured to the House of Commons; and more recently 'People, Plants and their Roots' that gathered together a number of memories from older people – some living with dementia, of plants and gardens & culminated in the publication and film *Alternative Yellow Book. Partners: Firstsite High Stile Projects. Funders: Arts Council England & Paul Hamlyn Foundation.*

Maggie Batchelar: Art Therapist

Presentation Title: **'Memories, Dreams, Reflections'**

Biography

Maggie has worked for the NHS for 30 years, 25 of those as an art therapist in mental health services, working across the age range in community and inpatient settings. Prior to her post-graduate art therapy training in Sheffield, she was involved in community arts in Newcastle –Upon- Tyne following her Fine Art degree. This culminated in her finding her feet as an art therapist in 1992.

Maggie has worked as an art therapist for mental health services in North Essex for 23 years and in Suffolk for 14 years with NSFT, in which she currently works in acute adult inpatient services in Ipswich, including the inpatient Later Life ward. She is involved in and committed to the Trust's Recovery model and in forging sustainable partnership working between NSFT and local community resources to enable more supportive and meaningful recovery pathways for those using services.

She is driven by her belief in the value of offering people the means to discover, or re discover a voice for themselves and their experiences through art making in a supportive environment.

Tracy Sharp: Natural Voice Singing Leader

Presentation Title: **'Filling the secret garden with song – reflections on the Musical Memories Project'**

Biography

Tracy Sharp spent 4 years as an English teacher; 10 years as a youth and community worker; & 13 years working with Suffolk Family Carers. Singing in large and small groups outside work was a personal delight and a constant life line. In consequence 12 years ago she began leading singing groups in community settings alongside Jennie Fisk, Fran Flower as part of Music in Our Bones

Music in our Bones runs accessible affordable and joyful singing workshops targeting people who are isolated in their caring role or by long term physical or mental health issues. The group Tracy will talk about today is Musical Memories was set up 4 years ago specialising in supporting people with dementia and their partners or adult children. It is supported by Suffolk Family Carers and a grant from Suffolk County Council.

Abstract 1

People Plants and Their Roots

Artist and gardener Jevan Watkins Jones described the journey of the ‘Alternative Yellow Book’ – an arts project and publication that gathered together personal memories of plants & gardens from older people living in a rural community in Essex through the use of drawing and conversation – a methodology Watkins –Jones calls ‘dialogistic drawing’.

His talk opened with reading from the book’s introduction - ‘Plant Matters’, expressing the collaborative nature of the project in metaphor:

‘I am contemplating the Alternative Yellow book as if it were a long border garden; seeing it actively from within it, whilst digging around its roots carefully as I pass along. The long border contains its individual plant subjects that en masse become another subject in itself, breathing the same air, defined by its own edges and by my distance from them. And then there is a growing evolving memory of how border shapes itself, season after season, year after year. What form does that memory take?’

The project was aimed exclusively at older people living with dementia. He explained how he was not prepared for the difficulties that some had in communicating or the physical difficulties of others for whom the producing of a mark on paper was, at times, a stretch too far. In contrast, he continued, he was not prepared at all for seeing in abundance, the indomitable spirit of creativity in our own senescence.

As a backdrop to this introduction he presented a digital film ‘Plant Memory’, showing himself remembering through the process of drawing on large scale canvases in a landscape. The film suggested the fixing and fading, and the fading and fixing of images past and present in the landscape of our minds. He elaborated about the complexity of making images that speak of these processes.

The presentation continued to open up the wider experience of the project in the light of the symposiums theme ‘Creativity in Later Life’ offering up five definitions of creativity – a word though in popular use, is often emptied of meaning and life.

- Creativity engages the singular and ensemble but is always relational
- Creativity manifests itself in both, ideal & adverse human conditions
- Creativity as a process can be slow or rapid
- Creativity can be experienced in ordinary or extraordinary situations.
- Creativity is not exclusive; it is not age specific, or arts specific, defined not by quality but by sincerity of expression.

The final word was given to the five projects oldest participants in the form of another digital film in which their personal recollections of plants & gardens from their childhood, working lives and the present day gives us an understanding of how of their (and our own) involvement with plant life contributes to a sense of wellbeing.

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Abstract 2

Memories, Dreams, Reflections

Maggie Batchelar, Art Psychotherapist

When invited to contribute to Inside Out Community's symposium on Creativity & Wellbeing in later Life – The Secret Garden, my thoughts turned to my memories of cycling to a residential elderly persons home when I was about 14, to chat with the residents whilst drawing them. I recall enjoying the stories, hearing of their experiences and of observing how these were etched in faces, hands postures and trying to capture this in my drawings. As an art student in Newcastle I volunteered with Age Concern and spent time visiting and drawing one gentlemen in particular. We got to know each other well and it met both our needs at that time as he had no family around and I was a long way from mine and in a culturally unfamiliar place.

I described these things in my own life as looking back, I now understand that drawing was a way of forging relationships. That being drawn, observed, listened to, offered an affirming experience (for both myself and the people I was drawing). Perhaps all the more important in the light of the many losses and changes in our lives as we grow older. It's been possible for me to see how later, I 'stumbled' across art therapy.

Over 25 years as an art therapist, I have worked across the age ranges, usually including working with older adults, both in inpatient and community settings. I have, and continue to come away from these encounters moved, thoughtful and with a sense of having been witness to fragments of people's lives in their images and communications.

It never ceases to amaze me how offering such simple conditions (of a space, time and some art materials), gives rise so readily to beautiful, touching, unique images and that the stories emerge from this. I think art making is about narrative, about storytelling, which has it seems, an evolutionary function in all societies and cultures. Whether in the memory and recall of places, people or in the here and now 'story' of the art medium; watching what happens when the colours move and blend on wet paper - the sense of witnessing something happening, emerging in the moment and shared together.

So, I think that art making takes you back and forth; from memory to the present. Often there are memories of using art materials many years ago at school, or home, and this is enhanced by the sensory qualities of the media ('I remember using charcoal, the mess it made!..., the smell of the plasticine...'). Of course, it's not uncommon for people to have had negative experiences of art at school, being given messages about 'not being any good' at it, which can stay with us. I invite people to begin to be curious again, to wonder what would happen if... and I usually find that this brings people to experiment with art media and to begin to engage, alongside my interest and curiosity in the materials too.

Then this brings the associated memories linked to those times; who was there, what life was like and bringing these into the present, into the conversation and in the art being made now. I think this experience can put us back in touch with part of ourselves and our experiences; *'Drawing is a powerful tool that can introduce people to themselves'* (Nicholson et al 2010)

An elderly lady with dementia in a group on an inpatient ward used soft pastels in a delicate and focussed manner, recalling the flowers in her mother's garden and being evacuated in the war. This memory and perhaps the experience of being alongside someone attentive (the art therapy student), evoked a longing for her parents; "I want them back". This feeling possibly amplified by some apparently fluctuating knowledge about where she was in her own journey. She was taken by a magazine image of a Grebe, floating along in the water and delighted in seeing this image each week as the art therapy group took place, returning to draw on the same image. This seemed to provide some sense of continuity when she was confused and disorientated much of the time. However, she was also very much in touch with her own present, as was poignantly evident in her observation of the Grebe; "forging ahead, always on the move". "He'll come to a halt soon, but then we all come to a halt at some time don't we". She was able to describe the human condition we share; *'All of us are creatures of a day; the rememberer and the remembered alike.'* (Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations*). The image created a vehicle for her to express this and the art making enabled her to be more in touch with herself; *'Who looks outside dreams, who looks inside, awakes'* (Carl Jung).

So, what does art making do? It can help us access emotional memory, by-passing cognitive impairment. Avenues of expression and communication become possible; if not in a linear, chronological recall, then in the sentiment, in the emotional contents. The tangible qualities of art materials invigorates, stimulates and often evoke sensory memories, which can be aroused, visited, much as in a dream. Memories can of course, be bittersweet, but I am often struck when working with older people, by the sense of urgency to voice regrets, difficult experiences, and to be reminded of the pleasures, the joys. I often have a sense of how art making can enliven, even very tentatively out of depression, inertia and a sense of loss.

Art making grounds us; it's mindful, in the moment. The pleasure of being able to make something happen can bring a sense of autonomy, volition, perhaps heightened when there may be many changes/losses in life, including physical and cognitive health and a reliance on others for so much.

Being engaged in some 'making' can lessen agitation, frustration, distress. The process can enhance communication, with ourselves and with others when in a group, helping people find a voice. Here, there's a common focus (art), bringing people out of social, emotional, psychological isolation and bridging relationships. It creates a different currency – a chance for people to be seen in a different light e.g through the painting, the drawing, the making/object and for this to be shared.

There is a plethora of recognition and evidence of the wellbeing benefits of the arts for us all, including in later life and including those with dementia. Across the country, there are exciting community arts initiatives for people of all ages, and a real development in arts engagement with older people. Art therapists and arts in health

projects/resources are supported by an ever-increasing understanding of the significant benefits to quality of life through engagement in the arts. Not least, the social isolation; **‘Tackling Loneliness in Older Age – the role of the arts’ – Baring Foundation report 2012** states that *‘...the arts can break down barriers and inspire, they can encourage people to try, sometimes for the first time in their lives, new activities. The arts can give a voice; build and grow confidence and help people feel valued. Create a moment in the week to look forward to, bringing people together and fostering new friendships’*, and in the report by **The Arts Council, ‘The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society’ (2014)**; *‘There are numerous pieces of research that evidence the positive impact that the arts can have on the physical, mental and social wellbeing of older people’*

In March this year, there was the 1st International Arts & Dementia Research Conference in London. Two days of inspiring presentations about initiatives around the country, focusing on the positive and life enhancing impact of engagement in the arts for people with dementia. www.ageofcreativity.co.uk ; is a network of professionals who all believe that creativity and the arts can support older people to achieve better health, wellbeing and quality of life. There are many other organisations and initiatives nationally and internationally, supporting the clear relationship between the arts and wellbeing benefits for us all, at any stage of life. It has become more apparent to me in my working life, that this may be enhanced for people in later life, experiencing the physical, cognitive and social changes frequently accompanying this phase of life. All the more reason to offer a means for people to regain, or retain, some autonomy, some sense of ownership over memory, experience and being able to communicate, document and share these through the arts. And these expressive mediums bringing pleasure, enjoyment, an in the moment release from worries and preoccupations. I also believe firmly in the positive gains from sharing these experiences with others; being activity or passively engaged in creativity can be a life enhancing experience for us all.

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Abstract 3

Filling the Secret Garden with Song

A reflection on Musical Memories - a specialist singing project for people with dementia and their families.

Music is like a switch, it's what wakes you from silence and the bars of your prison house' Sally Magnusson – Where Memories Go

Singing offers us the fantastic chance to really ‘find’ people through the songs they know and love, songs which evoke strong memories and stories from the past.

Why is it possible for people who have lost their ability to speak with confidence to still be able to sing with confidence?

Dr Tomaino from the Institute of Music and Neurologic Function in New York explains:

'It's all down to how the auditory system is wired...

Music is one of the first senses in the foetus and the last to go at death. It's one of the most robust sensory inputs we have.'

Some of our learning:

- Couples reconnecting to the love that united them in song and away from the 'carer' / 'cared for' roles, being sung to or hearing sung the songs that they sang when first together
- Laughter's important! As Roger with dementia said: Laughter can reinforce the joy, the purposefulness, the connectedness of all human beings. If only can see the forest of humanity instead of the trees of dementia.'
- Songs allow us to express both our grief as well as our joy and may lead to tears as well as laughter
- The group is as important to Family Carers as it is to their partners. They speak of arriving exhausted and leaving with lifted spirits. 'It's something to look forward to. It is like a ray of sunshine once a fortnight to boost the energy in order to cope with the darkness.'
- Creativity in singing is about communicating what we are feeling to others, it's about being expressive, and having a voice long after we stop being able to coherently say what we mean.
- Teaching new songs captures attention and offers real opportunities for everyone to delight in their learning
- Creativity can be about community – feeling part of a tribe where you matter
- Why volunteers? They offer us musical and human riches

What does singing and music uniquely offer people living with dementia?

A secret garden to retreat from hostile definitions of who we are as ...

- As a patient who sadly can't be helped
- An individual severed from our family and social connections
- As a series of deficits, with the focus being on what we can no longer do
- Someone often feeling lost and confused

Singing offers a secret garden to create a new space with others where we can:

- ‘Find’ the place where we feel secure and ourselves in familiar songs we’ve always loved
- Feel more strongly connected to those we love in sharing what we CAN do
- Learn new songs and skills
- Express our tears as well as our joy
- Become a valued part of a new tribe
- Live more fully in the here and now and encourage others to follow suit
- Celebrate being more fully alive in song dance and movement

‘The past, which is not recoverable in any other way, is embedded in the music as if in amber.

Music is the one thing dementia cannot destroy.’

Oliver Sacks

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