CoolTan Arts - enhancing well-being through the power of creativity

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Abstract
This article is a profile of CoolTan Arts, a pioneering arts and mental health charity based in South London that believes that mental well-being is enhanced by the power of creativity. CoolTan Arts exists to inspire the well-being and creative participation of a diverse range of people through the production of quality arts. It is a participant-led organisation, run by and for adults experiencing mental distress, underpinning all its activities with advocacy. Totally unique in its approach, CoolTan Arts integrates people with serious and common mental distress with the general public through its gallery and public events.

Key words
CoolTan Arts; Charity; Mental health; Well-being; Creativity; Self-advocacy

Beginnings
Established in 1990, CoolTan Arts became a registered charity in 1997. Taking its name from a disused suntan lotion factory where the founders squatted, it started off as a social enterprise, self-funded through organising arts workshops, parties, events and renting out space. Most people using CoolTan Arts in those days were adults who were socially excluded and/or on benefits. In 1993, CoolTan Arts moved to what had been the job centre in Brixton and stayed there for three years. After that CoolTan was ‘homeless’ until 2002, when it moved to the Railway Arches in Loughborough Junction. Finally, in 2006 the organisation moved to its current site on Walworth Road in Southwark.

Michelle Baharier, funder and current CEO, has transformed her own life and those of others. She was medically retired at the age of 28, but a traditional day centre did not meet her needs and she started to make art with friends in the old CoolTan suntan lotion factory. Together they ran art workshops and classes and exhibited work. Getting back into art was great for her self-esteem and improved her mental health. An idea was born to set up a charity that uses art as a positive healing force and helps people to get back into work and the community. Michelle started with £1,000 from a Millennium Grant in 2002, and by 2006 had a level 2 UnLtd award, which changed her own status from volunteer to employee.

Promoting recovery
CoolTan Arts today operates a vibrant arts centre in Southwark's lively Walworth Road, near Elephant and Castle, with a public art gallery and urban garden. It is used by 200 people a week, many more use it on a less regular basis. CoolTan Arts is an exemplary arts mental health charity; it meets the needs of people with mental distress and enables them to have a quality of life that promotes recovery and rehabilitation.
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‘Coming to CoolTan gives me a break from my illness and I can relax.’ (RM)

CoolTan Arts runs daily creative workshops including visual arts and drawing; Batik and fashion; video editing and filming; playwriting and poetry; web design and podcasting; IT; photography; and sculpture. This focus on the arts and creativity means that people stop being patients and start being people who ‘do’, and are valued by their friends, family and society as artists. CoolTan Arts aims to empower people in their lives and to be a creative centre where people can grow and achieve.

‘Less depressed, stopped self-harming, medication reduction, no longer have a social worker and coping with stress better. I also have a partner and am in a relationship after two years of not being able to leave my home.’ (X, participant)

CoolTan Arts’ 19 years of experience shows that creative arts workshops act at a therapeutic level and enable people to reconnect with their wider life expectations. People with mental illness often feel like medical objects, their life becomes sucked into medical labelling and processes; CoolTan’s approach of workshops and volunteering opportunities in an open centre can be life-changing.

‘CoolTan is like creative jogging.’ (SD, participant and trustee of CoolTan Arts)

‘CoolTan changed my head space and I stopped being a person who is only mentally ill, I was able to revalue my whole life, I now have a part-time job.’ (OC)

‘I got the confidence and skills I needed by attending an IT workshop at CoolTan, I also helped out as a volunteer. If it wasn’t for CoolTan I do not know where I would be now.’ (GP, participant)

Social inclusion

CoolTan Arts aims to empower people to move into the wider community through creative workshops, public art exhibitions, fashion shows, poetry readings, monthly cultural walks called the Largactyl Shuffle, websites, advocacy, volunteering, college and employment.

‘Weird place that CoolTan – I have exhibited art work for the first time, been published for the first time and began speaking instead of mumbling monosyllables. Be careful, it may be contagious.’ (AH, walk leader and manager of social enterprise)

Providing meaningful opportunities, creative expression and the opportunity to learn useful skills, CoolTan Arts enables people to undo the stigma of mental distress. We achieve this through quality arts education with professional outcomes, such as public exhibitions, advocacy and self-advocacy training, and social enterprise principles.

‘The workshops gave me confidence not just in my work, but in my home life. I was...’
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encouraged to exhibit my work and hope to teach one of the workshops one day or help to run the office.’ (O, participant now employed by the service users’ council at Maudsley Hospital)

'I modelled my own designs on the catwalk in Hoxton's Alternative Fashion Show, which gave me great self-assurance. I felt very glamorous, and it made me feel the need to look after myself.’ (LD, participant in Batik Workshop)

'The poetry workshops have given me the confidence to speak in group situations.’
(AF, now has a part-time job)

Every year, 15% of people who use CoolTan Arts’ facilities move on into the wider community, employment, college, volunteering or other forms of empowerment.

'I have been at CoolTan Arts for three and a half years. I have had other jobs in the past, so called better than here, but I prefer CoolTan because they know my needs. Since

Challenging stigma
CoolTan Arts is also about destigmatising mental distress – with an independent art gallery and a monthly cultural walk called the Largactyl Shuffle. As well as organising art exhibitions in its own gallery, CoolTan Arts also showcases the artwork of the participants at other venues, including hospitals, libraries, City Hall, other art galleries and took part in the Alternative Fashion Show in April 2010 for the third time.

To coincide with World Mental Health Day 2009, CoolTan Arts organised the exhibition Altered States, at Dulwich Picture Gallery. Artists from Dulwich Picture Gallery worked alongside CoolTan Arts participants, sharing their knowledge and skills. The resulting exhibition included paintings, drawings and screen prints by CoolTan artists experiencing mental distress, and explored themes relating to changes in the way we feel, see or think. The name Altered States was chosen as a way to encourage a greater focus on what mental health actually is, to raise awareness about mental health, to challenge stigma and to reduce barriers.

'I was absolutely amazed at how everybody’s idea of an altered state was interpreted in totally different ways – it was a lovely process to watch my poem become a print.’ (LN, now in college)
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The opening attracted 150 people, a mix of CoolTan participants and artists, volunteers, funders, local councillors and members of the local community. Being able to showcase at such a prominent venue was a fantastic opportunity for CoolTan Arts participants, increasing their levels of confidence and enhancing their well-being and community spirit.

The Largactyl Shuffle
One of CoolTan Arts’ most ambitious project to date is the Largactyl Shuffle, a monthly cultural walk through the Borough of Southwark from Maudsley Hospital to Tate Modern. The Largactyl Shuffle was named after an antipsychotic drug that can have extreme physical side effects including a distinctive shambolic gait. The Largactyl Shuffle group have been exploring the hidden histories of Southwark, mental health and arts for the past two years. The project makes explicit the link between good mental health, the environment and exercise, while offering people with mental distress meaningful opportunities to be part of the wider community by leading and managing regular public events. The project was launched two years ago and has gone from strength to strength. CoolTan Arts are planning to develop walks in other boroughs, with the Largactyl Shuffle having an active role in the Olympics and Paralympics in 2012, and increasing its partnership work at Tate Modern.

‘CoolTan Art’s Largactyl Shuffle – one of the best 10 walks in London.’ (TimeOut, 2009)

In 2009, CoolTan Arts were awarded funding by the Mayor’s Story of London Heritage Lottery Fund to make a film about their groundbreaking guided Midnight Largactyl Shuffle. The premiere of this film, The Largactyl Shuffle, was shown at the British Film Institute in February 2010. CoolTan Arts hopes to show this film and other films made by CoolTan volunteers and participants at film festivals around the world, recognising and celebrating the achievements of CoolTan Arts’ participants, raising awareness about mental health and demonstrating creative ways to challenge stigma and discrimination associated with mental distress.

CoolTan Arts will also commission sculpture and art as part of the Largactyl Shuffle project. It will also work with local partners, including Southwark Council, Maudsley Hospital, the Institute of Psychiatry and other voluntary groups and local residents to create a cultural legacy and intrigue for a neglected historic site – Camberwell Orchards at Camberwell Green. Other aims are to promote urban ecology, encourage inward investment and tourism, demonstrate environmental sustainability and promote recovery, rehabilitation and participation into the wider community.

CoolTan Arts hopes that a living sculpture made by people with mental distress will create a focal point for meeting and conversation. It will enable patients to have a reason to leave the Maudsley Hospital and visit it, and will also give new life to neglected green space. It will have a sustainable life because CoolTan Arts will commit to horticultural maintenance that will expand our workshops and volunteering opportunities, while providing a social contribution and integration.

The Largactyl Shuffle and its artworks will provide volunteering and employment; encourage locals to appreciate and value their local community and attract people from outside the local area to visit, enjoy and support local businesses. A regular participant in the walk says:

‘It is good to get out with other people who are in a similar situation to me. The talk about the history of the local area is very interesting. I learned something about the borough I didn’t know before. The actual walk going through green areas is quite relaxing and enjoyable. It is nice to go to the river with company because I am usually quite isolated. It is really good that the walk ends at the Tate Modern because you can look at the art afterwards.’ (WB)

New projects and future challenges
Having a strong focus on the arts and creative activity, CoolTan Arts has realised that in the current climate, it is important that people with mental distress know their rights and are better equipped to face challenging situations. Thanks to funding from Comic Relief, CoolTan Arts has launched a ground-breaking advocacy and self-advocacy training programme to support our other work. This is composed of one-to-one learning
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operating from an old dilapidated warehouse with a portaloo. We have been looking for a new home for over a year. It is incredibly difficult to find suitable and affordable premises in Southwark with good transport connections and spaces big enough to accommodate a gallery, three workshop rooms and office space.

Mental health is a major and growing public health issue. CoolTan Arts is determined to be part of the solution and continue to enrich and empower the local community. All they need is the opportunity.

Reference

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Kathrin Kirrmann has been CoolTan Arts’ Communications Officer since October 2008. She became involved with the organisation in June 2008 as a Largactyl Shuffle walker and volunteer.