



featured *Artist*

Creating & Connecting SLaM

By Helen Shearn

My role as arts development manager in mental health at South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust (SLaM) is rather hybrid - as it involves quite a few characteristics! Nurturing, connecting, researching, enabling, strategising, problem solving ... It's creative in itself, like weaving threads and stitches and trying to get to grips with the whole picture (if there is a whole!), with its many art forms and relationships. It is work in progress and a thing of passion but also one of red tape, funding applications, careful detail and teamwork to ensure success. I'm lucky to have been working in this role and associated work in Southwark for a number of years so have seen many people benefiting from the arts.



I like to see connections and to facilitate the growth and development of involvement, partnerships and projects and making the arts accessible. The detective work finding research and trying to make sense of it, to promote and inform others is satisfying because the field of arts in mental health, is getting better acknowledgement and more rigorous evidence is being published. The Department of Health has stated "The arts are and should be firmly recognised as being integral to health, healthcare provision and healthcare environments." DoH 2007.

The arts offer a multitude of benefits too numerous to list here, (I will be setting out a reference list in our Trust's art's strategy, but here are useful websites www.startmc.org.uk/art_and_wellbeing.php (Start



Photograph by Kathrin Kirmann

Healing Arts Team @ the Costa cafe,
Maudsley Hospital, SE5 8AZ

arts and mental health service in Manchester) and the national resource for creativity and health, www.cultureandwellbeing.org.uk/

Of all the various quotes I've come across to describe what's great about the arts I agree with Start, who say that "Matarasso points out that art has a unique ability to help us to find meaning in the world and, in turn, he suggests that art interprets the world back to us. It is this capacity for art to embody meaning and value that makes it so powerful in rebuilding lives" (Start).

"Art as activity, process and object, is central to how people experience, understand and then shape the world" (Matarasso, F. (1997) *Use or Ornament? the social impact of participation in the arts.* Comedia Conference)

I think it's only fitting to make a reference to

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our hands, since they are usually integral to using the arts. It is fascinating how they work and connect us to the outside world through touch, play, exploration etc. The author Raymond Tallis explains that the success of the human hand lies in its incorporation of three quite distinct attributes into one single structure; it is not just an organ of manipulation, but also an organ of knowledge and communication. The hand acts, it knows, and it speaks. Our 'tool' hand is an instrument of great power and precision at the same time. Our 'cognitive' hand through touch comprehends, interrogates, explores, and distinguishes the external world, and 'sees' in the dark. Our 'communication' hand complements our voice and conveys feelings and emotions. (*The Hand: a Philosophical Inquiry into Human Being* as reviewed by J. Le Fanu).

Touching, holding and talking about objects in our hands, can help people with mental health problems engage with art and also encourage empowerment and learning. It has been acknowledged that those living with memory loss such as dementia respond with interest to new objects. "Some part of the brain has registered something in the past and novelty creates new interest" (Patricia Baines, 2007). In the *Lets talk about Art* at the Tate Modern, an inspirational project for older adults with mental health problems such as Dementia, Liz Ellis (curator) sensitively and warmly encourages our participants to touch different materials and objects and to think and talk about connections and associations with the art in front of them. For example, weathered and worn limbs of wood and other materials/ objects are felt and rubbed with pencils on paper, alongside members of staff. This then is related to the dark woody scene with a small red outlined bird in the painting *Forest and Dove* by Max Ernst. One of the participants suggests that the bird is in a dark pit. We find out that this bird is Max, and this is how he symbolises his life and situation. It's the connections not only to the things that are touched but also the lives of the artists which we find can resonate with ours, that are so therapeutic. We have measured the impact on mental wellbeing of this project using the MWIA (Mental Wellbeing Impact Assessment) toolkit which has clarified that this project offers opportunities not just for social inclusion (such as attending a prestigious public building like the Tate Modern) and reducing isolation but also facilitates staff professional development and enhanced relationships with service users.

The Healing Art Team (HAT) based at the Maudsley hospital uses meditative and creative activities like yoga, meditation, sound, and visual media such as clay, painting and drawing. Its bead making which requires the fairly simple action of rolling the small balls of clay and it's the soothing and cyclic motion which can link energetically to the heart through our hands says Jagat Joti Kaur, project manager HAT (www.uponatime.co.uk/). HAT is building a programme which will encompass more innovative work which brings together staff, service users and people from the community to come together to make and create. The exhibition in the Costa café (here pictured) and main corridor attest to the contributions from members sharing their wellbeing journeys through their healing arts.

Picture by HAT / Healing Arts Team @ the Costa

Enhancing the environment is one of our key areas in the Maudsley and we've managed to accomplish quite a lot over the years with charitable funding, lots of talent, commitment and passion. Joti and the HAT team have done wonders as this picture shows. I've also coordinated and installed a permanent art collection of beautiful art by people who've experienced mental health problems in the Outpatients consulting rooms which were once bare. This is courtesy of a legacy by a former patient.



Café, Maudsley Hospital, SE5 8AZ

It is very apparent to me that it is the **social connectedness through art** that is so meaningful and effective. I know that participants can benefit so much from working and sharing together activities and events in a community. It's the "sense of belonging, purpose and mutual care through regular attendance" (Parr, H. 2005). Hester Parr in her research of arts projects in Scotland found that exhibition events are particularly important for groups who have previously felt marginalised due to stigmatising social relations. They facilitate a wider sense of place and belonging within the community. "The arts bring with them the possibility for centring marginalised voices, experiences and locations." It seems that what is so vital is "opportunities for specific kinds of art-talk, peer-advice giving, friendships, acts of reciprocity, facilitation of workshops and participating in cultural events like exhibitions within and beyond art project space: all



of these were dimensions that artists identified as ones that facilitated both self-esteem and a range of positive emotions and that contributed to the social benefits of project participation. Also the strong sense of collective artistic endeavour..... amongst artists at very different stages of recovery and well-being, clearly helped to facilitate the building of social bonds and friendship network amongst participants” (Parr, H. 2005).

These findings resonate with the local service user led arts projects that I support, like CoolTanArts, CreativeRoutes www.creativeroutes.org and HAT. They are very different projects which enable and collaborate to involve participants in trying many activities, not just the creative activity of making things. It encourages practice in other roles and tasks to do with organising events and working in a team, through its workshops, and exhibitions etc.



Here is an example of one of CoolTan Arts projects The Largactyl shuffle outside the Maudsley hospital, which is a regular historic walk from Tate Modern to the Maudsley. As CoolTan Arts states “*We aim to promote positive mental health/well being, bringing about a change in how participants perceive themselves, enabling people to gain greater focus and to re-establish their relationship with society. We aim to offer lifelong learning and enable people to achieve qualification and accreditation status in the coming year. We achieve this through quality arts education with professional outcomes such as public exhibitions, and social enterprise principles.*” www.cooltanarts.org.uk/



Photograph by Kathrin Kirrmann

Picture of Cooltan Arts in front of Maudsley hospital- Largactyl shuffle



Photograph by Elisha Foster

Amongst my colleagues, here in SLaM we also aim to facilitate social connectedness through the arts. Beth Elliott (Bethlem art gallery coordinator (www.bethlemgallery.com) at the Royal Bethlem Hospital (in SLaM). Beth and I have been coordinating the development of a Trustwide Arts Strategy, which I will be consulting on over the next 6 months. We were encouraged by our colleague Michaela Ross (Bethlem arts coordinator) to see that the work we do in the arts in mental health has a place in contemporary art practice, which emphasises the sociability of art - its capacity to create models of action and interaction. Whereas individual artists may have different motivations for making work, making work with - or perhaps just alongside - others create not just an art ‘product’ but a social space where people come together to participate in a



Photograph by Elisha Foster



Photograph by Kathrin Kirrmann

shared activity. The sociability of art - its capacity to form relationships - is a key aspect of the arts. From the discussions that take place in the art-room, to the comments left by visitors to the Bethlem Art Gallery and the other exhibition spaces across the Trust, we hope to continue to construct social spaces through art, and create new relationships through dialogue with others outside of the hospital environment. There is a huge variety of art practices taking place within our Trust.

A lot of my work is about relationships and this can be in the form of mentoring as well as partnerships where collaboration and experience is fostered with individuals and organisations. Such as with our close neighbour Tate Modern and the arts organisations as mentioned. There is the ongoing partnership with Roy Birch, (Survivors Poetry's very own!) where we have worked hard at trying to redevelop and steer a London network, Creative Minds. The Thou Art project with Olivia Sagan, (senior research fellow), the University of the Arts London and partners in arts in mental health is an exciting research and development project exploring community-based art practice and its links to well-being and progression opportunities in the lives of service users. Participants are interviewed about their experience and art work and these informal, conversational interviews are filmed and then themes are explored by the researchers. This project offers training to some participants, in interviewing, recording, filming and editing, and the final film, with edited interviews and art works will be distributed to mental health centres and community arts organisations to raise awareness of survivors' lived experience and artistic journeys. We are hoping to screen this Thou Art film at the Tate Modern in June 2011 as part of the Fringe Arts Programme, including the Impact Arts Fair at Candid Arts in May 2011, in partnership with the Otherside Gallery, www.theothersidegallery.org and Creative Futures, Emergence and Bethlem Gallery. Also we should be holding an arts in mental health conference next year within this programme, in partnership with London Arts in Health Forum (LAHF) www.lahf.org.uk/

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If online, click here to download 'Thou Art' flyer.

<http://www.creativemindsLondon.co.uk/>

<http://www.southwark.tv/slmaud/slmhome.asp>

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