

The Graduate School of Education  
The University of Melbourne

# UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts



Guest Editors

*Mike White*

*Margret Meagher*

*Dr. Sarah Atkinson*

Volume 3 | Issue 3 | 2013

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International perspectives on the  
development of research-guided practice  
in community-based arts in health



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## ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

*The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is based within the Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne, Australia. The journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.*

*Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.*

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# International perspectives on the development of research-guided practice in community-based arts in health

## **Guest Editors**

*Mike White*

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## **THEME**

Health has become a recurrent topic in discussion of the role of the arts in society, fuelled by a growing body of research into links between culture and flourishing. In community arts in particular there has been a widespread development of projects addressing health issues. This is a distinct area of activity operating mainly outside of acute healthcare settings and is characterised by the use of participatory arts to promote health. There are indications that this work is developing in response to health needs of communities in differing cultures and healthcare systems around the world, but so far there is little mutual knowledge or connection of the work at an international level.

This issue aims to draw together well-researched case studies of community-based arts in health projects from different parts of the globe. Each case study should explain the motivation for the work undertaken and its sensitivity to context and cultural diversity, the partnership structures and ethos developed in its delivery, and the research methodologies used. Submissions are particularly invited that reflect multidisciplinary knowledge of the application of arts development to health and flourishing communities from the perspectives of applied arts, public health, anthropology, social geography, education and other disciplines.

From Autistic to Artistic  
An Artist's Developmental Pathway  
through the Health and Disability Sector

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*Contemporary Artist*

## ABSTRACT

This discussion paper describes the international career development of an emerging artist spanning France and the Antipodes.

The research, carried out using participant observation and narrative methodologies, demonstrates how the artist's passion was revealed via different engagement pathways in the visual arts with tangible outcomes. This involved the planning of novel, inspiring and accessible contexts for the artist to develop new social competencies. At the core of this intervention was the development of a network of formal and informal collaboration between international organisations.

Many people on the autistic spectrum, due to social challenges, may never experience achievement within their communities. Participatory arts, however, offer unique prospects for contribution and recognition. This research demonstrates how inter-sectorial collaborations have the potential to generate new authentic inclusion opportunities for clients in the Health and Disability sector with benefits spreading to the community at large. It demonstrates how a passion for the arts paved the way from disengagement to contribution.

The paper details how unique interventions were planned, rolled out and evaluated for their impact. Examples with unique outcomes to the artist, family, therapists, educators and organisations involved are discussed. These benefits have also spread in unpredicted ways, i.e. the artist being recognised for leadership qualities and becoming a role model.

## KEYWORDS

*Participatory arts, Inclusion, Autistic spectrum, Engagement.*

*i.*  
[tinyurl.com/  
storytelling4impact](http://tinyurl.com/storytelling4impact)

## INTRODUCTION

This discussion paper describes an international long-term collaboration that evolved between institutions and community-based arts in health projects. These collaborations spanned across four years and two antipodal countries: New Zealand and France. Our research sought to document the pathway of a young artist starting as a client of the Health and Disability sector through to long-term sustainable integration in the community. It is valuable to document such a pathway because though there is an abundance of literature on the impact of the arts in the Health and Disability sector, there is little to explain how an autistic artist can overcome communication challenges to gain societal recognition and build a career in the arts. This research paper includes a companion online video collection <sup>i</sup> of examples of the events along the milestones of the artist pathway.

The term 'Arts for Health' refers to a set of activities taking place in the health sector mostly outside of acute healthcare settings where participatory arts is used as a response to health needs of communities. Arts for Health programmes work to achieve short and long-term health and social outcomes aiming to strengthen partnerships and the development of knowledge and skills (South 2006; Wyn et al. 2000).

A range of research methodologies were used, that were context-dependent such as participant-observer, survey and discourse analysis. The methodologies were useful in describing the partnerships established along this pathway that ranged from informal to formal and budget-driven. The story milestones pave the change in discourse from being labelled as autistic to recognised for his artistic gift - from a diagnosis of Asperger, to talent identification.

It is important to note that two of the author's are connected to Y personally - as his sister and mother - and acknowledge that this brings with it bias to portray Y positively. Still, we value this opportunity to present Y and his artistic journey, and hope that we can bring a further depth to his story. We also have contributions on this paper from the director of a documentary made about Y, from Moving Image and Blue Water Productions. Finally, there will be discussion about accessibility to the art world by the co-founder from Eg'Art Association, and also commentary by Y's art mentor, about his development as a painter.

## THE DIAGNOSIS

The artist started his journey as a client in the New Zealand Health and Disability Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service where a psychiatrist issued a diagnosis of Aspergers Syndrome. One recommendation was to provide him with educational support as well as respite care for his family. With this diagnosis the family turned to the education authorities who started the paperwork trail to organise the necessary funding. This interaction with the Health and Disability system was brief but sufficient to set in motion the intervention to take place in the client's school setting.

*Illustration 1: Photo collage of the artist first gallery exhibition – at the age of 16.*



ii. *Our use of 'mixed-abilities' and 'differently abled' is a form of linguistic activism that resists the inherent prejudice in words like 'disability' and 'impaired'. At the same time, we have instances of including them where it is impractical to replace them or they describe existing structures such as 'the disability sector'.*

Illustration 1 shows a photo collage of the artist's first exhibition. SANDZ is a community gallery that works with and exhibits art of people with mixed abilities.

<sup>ii</sup> The illustration refers to the video clip (Item 7 from the media list) which features the artist as well as professionals from the education and health and disability sectors attending the exhibition opening. Amongst them was the Consultant Psychiatrist who first admitted him into the Child and Adolescent Mental Health clinic and who subsequently provided ongoing encouragement to paint and exhibit his work.

## GAINING SKILLS

The following section describes a series of interventions that were carried out to craft success experiences for the budding artist. This was supported by the provision of a special funding allocation to fund a teacher aide for the student throughout his schooling – up to high school graduation. The Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Schemes (ORRS) provide resources for school students throughout New Zealand who have the highest need for special education. About 7000 students receive this



assistance at any one time. This funding allowed for additional teacher aide hours to support the student in mainstream education and additional staffing allocations and operational grants paid to New Zealand schools providing specialist assistance. During this time, his arts teacher discovered and nurtured his talent – providing reparatory experiences to boost his self-esteem and self-confidence that were at risk of damage from a series of educational challenges.

Janson (2011) described the three pillars of transformational teaching for at-risk students as ‘Attitude, Motivation and Agency’. In the first instance, it is the teacher’s attitude that is under scrutiny. Indeed, the teacher’s positive disposition will greatly facilitate the opening of new possibilities for the student. After having identified where the passion of the student laid, the teachers needed to experiment with interventions that would carry the student forward. Teachers worked as a team to design interventions and monitor their effectiveness throughout the student’s school years. Interventions were based on the student’s motivation to excel as an artist. Not all interventions and activities bore fruits and not all days ended with success. Collaborating teams, however, were clear about the aim of their interventions and their potential long-term repercussions, hence the expectations of all involved for ‘extra’ordinary outcomes played an important part in the process.

The methodology used for this part of the project was participant-observation (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). This was made possible via the formal mechanism of the ‘Individual Educational Plan’. Individual Educational Plan meetings provided the terrain for the collaboration between teachers and family to meet at regular intervals to craft and follow up the schools activities that would support his interest. Teachers referred to this work as following a ‘keyhole’ strategy - teachers fashioned credit-earning tasks that were ‘funnelled through’ his motivation to improve his art: writing an artist CV, laying out an exhibition, interacting with team and professionals. Hence, the secondary school environment was able to support the artist organise his own exhibitions - first in school then spreading into the community. The fact that the student was supported to achieve full high school graduation is a tribute to the built-in flexibility in the New Zealand education system. This flexibility allowed for the school to recognise much of the peripheral activity surrounding the building of an artist career as part of New Zealand high school matriculation (Janson 2010).

School activities actively enrolled Information Technologies. This supported Beyl and Bauwens’ (2010) account of how the relationship between the artist and the audience may be impacted by technology in an interactive Internet environment. If indeed art is a process of social communication according to these authors, how then can it be enrolled to help overcome the many communication challenges that autistic artists face? How suited is the elearning environment to students with disabilities?

To address this question, Baaijens (2010) researched published and unpublished literature, video documentaries, and online resources by authors from various disciplines on art education for students with a range of abilities. The project conducted face-to-face interviews in community-based art educational settings and an online questionnaire to uncover best practices and critical success factors. The research conducted, documented and discussed case studies (including one about the artist followed in the present discussion paper in a variety of art educational settings to determine how inclusion can best advance creative development of these



students). The author reported that the benefits of tertiary inclusive art education stretched beyond the students to peer students as well as professionals working in the disability and education sectors and the wider community.

Baaijens recommended to further investigate the hypothesis that intellectual different ability may affect the self-monitoring part of the brain but not the self-expression part, thus creating a natural conducive condition for people to be creative. The implications for teaching students on the autism spectrum and those with different intellectual abilities are huge, as this provides them with an opportunity to develop visual language which can serve as an alternative to linguistic communications. This is particularly important when a student's linguistic communications are partially or wholly impaired. It provides students with a voice and opportunities for self-advocacy for pathways in the arts sector. When such students cannot access art education they would never be able to demonstrate their creative and artistic abilities and realise the potentials for personal and artistic growth that comes with that. Providing access to art education will not only affect the students on the autistic spectrum but also their non-impaired peers as they model unique creative processes without which art education would not be complete. Further, the author recommended to research how care, support, transition and other disability organisations (including those governing and funding the tertiary art education and disability sectors) can best develop and cultivate inclusive attitudes, visions, policies and strategies that will enable intellectually differently abled students to transition into tertiary art education, including distance education.

*Illustration 2: Story about the artist as a role model from his Art School catalogue*



Illustration 2 displays a story about the artist from the tertiary education provider which he attended via distance learning and from which he graduated with a Diploma Arts and Creativity (Honours). For its 2011 catalogue, The Learning Connexion chose him as a role model for students with disabilities. The process of elearning proved to be the mechanism which would allow the budding artist to pursue his studies at a distant Tertiary Art School. As this method of teaching was first successfully checked during the secondary school years, the student was able to enrol at this art school foundation programme in his last year before high school graduation.

## GAINING RECOGNITION

The methodology followed to assess the position of the media in the artist pathway was a thematic analysis (Janson 2011) of the articles published about him between 2008 and 2012 in the media and listed below in the reference section. The findings from this analysis reveal two patterns of media change across this time span: visibility and emphasis.

### MEDIA VISIBILITY

The first articles published about the artist were unassuming, as expressed in article location and word count. These articles were small and generally located at the back of the newspaper. Over the years, media emphasis changed to become more visible, edging all the way to the front page of the weekend magazine section and an insert in the front page of the newspaper itself. Similarly, the length of the stories grew from a succinct 150-word column with one photo to a four-page spread including 14 photos in the last publication surveyed. This will be further described in Illustration 3 below.

*Illustration 3: Recent media article published about the artist*



Illustration 3 displays the last media piece published about him as the present article goes to print. It demonstrates this shift in representation of the artist and as the last piece in a series of similar media pieces, it may represent a trend that brings out the artist before the autism.

## DISCOURSE EMPHASIS

The first articles reviewed about the artist stressed his autistic/Asperger condition, with an explanation of the condition as early as in the third paragraph. As the articles were short this trend seemed to emphasise the medical condition over the artistic talent. This too changed over time. The last media piece published to date does not mention autism in the main body of the article but rather focuses on his personality, stories about his painting style and his life.

Other media channels contributed to strengthen his reputation. After he became, at the age of nineteen, the youngest artist to ever have been invited into the NZ Academy of Fine Arts, the Our Changing World national radio programme stressed that he *'brings people face to face with the future images of our cities and landscapes'* (Radio New Zealand 2010) and the Central News television speaker mentioned that *'people identify with his paintings in ways that are new to them. They engage with his work because they feel it was created especially for them and expresses their story'* (TV Central 2010).

These last two quotes represent the start of the recognition as a valued contribution made by the artist to not just the community around him but society as a whole. The ten awards that the artist received as study scholarships and special projects grants were testimony to his becoming recognised in both the art and the community world and a role model to his peers and siblings.

The thematic analysis of the media articles about the artist displayed a move from an initial emphasis on his medical condition to that of his talent.

## STARTING TO NETWORK – CLOSING THE COMMUNICATION GAP

Working on social abilities, including communication and relationship building, proved more challenging than working on school curriculum. As expected, interacting with peers was hard for the Asperger student who had large social gaps. Social challenges turned out to be a significant obstacle to overcome when it came to his next milestone – talent development. The expression 'closing the communication gap' refers to the act of completing missing information from the artist's perspective. Indeed, in creating art, the artist did share his emotions and his message, however the nature of his communication challenge meant that in return he did not understand the impact of his art on his audience - the other part of the communication equation.

Support from the New Zealand Community Art sector helped the artist organise a mounting number of exhibitions in significant galleries (over 40 group and solo exhibitions to date). Curators and gallery managers came to know the artist, and some of them developed a personal connection with him. In 2010, The Hamilton

Community Arts Council awarded him an Artist Development Grant to assist with his third overseas exhibition in Canada. A video clip from the Canada exhibition opening (Item 8 from the media list) with the curator's commentary about the artist and exhibition demonstrates this special relationship. Illustration 4 displays a painting that was chosen as finalist for the New Zealand National Youth Art Award. The title made up of words that rhyme is another example of a special communication that he initiated with his environment.

*Illustration 4: Right  
Bright White Light  
Night, Yaniv Janson,  
Acrylic on Canvas, 100  
X 180cm; Finalist in the  
2011 National Youth  
Award Competition,  
Waikato Society of Arts*



At first, personal connections were mostly one-sided relationships, with the adults in his life making most of the efforts to understand and bridge his communication challenges. These relationships combined to support a budding career with praise and mentorship. The concept of 'networking' for business was predictably obscure to the Asperger mind, but repeated experience demonstrated concrete gains from having put effort in developing these personal connections which provided powerful learning experiences for the artist. The experience of these personal connections 'imprinted' on the artist's mind how important these were for his future as described in the next two quotes:

*'At times I would find gallery visitors engrossed in [Y's paintings], absorbed by the story. It was not just Y's work that invited the viewer to sit and contemplate it was the artist himself' – Jude Ross, ArtsPost Gallery, Waikato Museum, 2010*

*'One thing that is noticeable is that he is using his art to express ideas that are important to him more subtly and effectively as his mastery of the craft increases...he is extremely focused, self-directed and very diligent.' – Martha Simms, President Waikato Society of Arts, 2010*



Beyond the 'functional' characteristics of a business network, art was continuing to be the keyhole through which gaps in social knowledge could be discovered and tested.

The previous section identified the need to assist the artist develop one part of his communicative efforts. The following section describes the research that was carried out to characterise and understand another side of the communicative value of his art. This part of the research was designed to palliate the artist's social challenges by learning from survey data what clients liked about his art and might have communicated directly to another artist who did not cope with autism.

Forty participants were surveyed amongst people who had bought his art and art lovers about their reactions to his art. The survey also asked participants to rate paintings in order to identify a representative selection. The three common themes that emerged from this study follow:

## EXPRESSING EMOTIONS THROUGH COLOR

Participants commented about the artist's use of colors as evoking deep emotions within. They described emotions lingering on as a reaction to his paintings, often conducive to purchasing a work of art. For example, one participant described emotions as strong as feeling as though a missing piece of their life had been found; a woman seeing the painting 'Houses of Rich and Poor People' exclaimed '*The house in this painting was my life while growing up. My mother was a solo mum struggling to raise us, but her resolve helped us get through a coloured house - this one!!*' She like many others viewing this art, found that it strikes a chord with an intangible yet familiar emotional identification – a 'feast' of colour (Hastings 2011). These experiences where something has been touched inside, often manifested as verbal gratitude or long heartfelt hugs with the artist. Another participant said '*The painting My Black and White Life in Colours represents the way other people want me to live my life - a house that is only black and white, the "normative" way, and I want to live in a rainbow house, with all the colours of the spectrum - just like the gay flag. This is a painting about my life.*'

## COMMUNICATION FLOW: LESS IS MORE

The abstract nature of some of his paintings has been a source of inspiration for many of his admirers. The minimalistic disposition of his art provides an insight into his perspective, simultaneously giving the opportunity for the viewer to form their own connection with the painting's message. For example, according to one respondent, this art provides 'statements without words', complementing another's impression that '*there is a lot happening in many of [the paintings] and much of it is subtle.*'

## ENTERING A WORLD OF FANTASY AND HUMOUR

Many respondents felt that there is a magical quality to the artist's paintings, '*something that we all dream about, but are not bold enough to convey.*' Some participants described responding to some paintings by experiencing a state of happiness, a place in their mind they can escape to while observing the painting that proves to be very calming and pleasant. For instance, one respondent reminisced, [The paintings] '*remind me of*

when I first used to read fairy tales when I was a child...it is like he is managing to paint the imagination or dreams rather than the harsh reality.' Respondents also noted the presence of strikingly unconventional elements in the art. One respondent mentioned that his unbalanced way of painting opposites (for instance in water reflections) has a mysterious quality that teases the viewer's mind as it brings out the quirky nature of the artist: *'The calm and serenity...the game of colors and tones, the minimalism. The paintings are very decorative, sometimes funny, always interesting, we wish to see more.'*

*'The quirky nature of his personality is evident. The reflection pieces are often not exact opposites, close but different enough to be unusual and make the composition unique. ... My favorites are the ones that evoke a response from me about what might be imagined or hidden inside a piece rather than the obvious. I also like the more monochrome pieces, they suggest winter, power, darkness, emotion, strength, force. The best to me are the blues; his rendition of water, ice and all things connected, is brilliant, very emotional, very deep.'*

Overall, his art, as one respondent, concisely put it, are 'bold gestures, complemented by vibrant colors.'

Illustration 5: UNESCO Teaching resource using the documentary made about the artist

The image shows a screenshot of a UNESCO teaching resource page. At the top, there is a navigation bar with a world map and colored circles representing different regions: Australia, China, Kazakhstan, Korea, New Zealand, Singapore, Thailand, and Others. The main content area features a title 'Teacher resource: Including special needs students in Visual Arts to develop key competencies about environmental issues' and a video player showing a close-up of a person's face. Below the video, there is text describing the resource and the artist, Yaniv Daniel Janson. On the right side, there is a search bar and a sidebar with 'New Zealand Subject' and 'Tag Cloud' sections.

iii.  
*'Yaniv Saves the World'*  
by John Mandelberg  
(2010) trailer at: <http://vimeo.com/46170213>

iv.  
[tinyurl.com/UNESCO-TeachingResource](http://tinyurl.com/UNESCO-TeachingResource)

v.  
*an equal access to art') Association*

vi.  
*Centre de la Gabrielle*  
MFPass: <http://www.centredelagabrielle.fr/>

vii.  
*The Institut Mutualiste Montsouris is a private non-profit hospital participating in public service. The hospital is a member of the Hospital Group of the French Federation of Mutual insurance companies. Its activities cover a wide range of medical and surgical diseases, with highly specialized teams. The hospital is organized into departments and medical clinics led by individual department chiefs. To provide truly equal access to care, doctors at the IMM are salaried, in most cases full time, and without private activity. <http://www.imm.fr/en/>*

Recognition culminated with a documentary made about the artist. The documentary that was made about him (Mandelberg 2010) <sup>iii</sup> screened to a full house at the 2012 SPARK festival (International Festival of Media, Arts and Design) held yearly in the artist's home city. It encapsulates aforementioned concepts and experiences. The trailer to this documentary is available through Illustration 5 as the screenshot of a UNESCO resource for arts teacher downloadable from the APAH (Asia Pacific Art Hub) website <sup>iv</sup>. The resource describes how art teachers can help all students, including those with disabilities, develop key competencies such as Relating to Others and Participating and Contributing.

## LAUNCHING AN INTERNATIONAL CAREER

In order to expand Y's career out of the New Zealand context, his family together with The Learning Connexion searched for international organisations having a practical vision for non-mainstream artists. At the time we came across one such organisation- Eg'Art. Collaborating with the French Health and Disability sector ('le secteur medico-social') included working with the ég'Art (Pour un égal acces a l'art, translated as: 'For an equal access to art') Association <sup>v</sup>. This association was created in September 2010 by professionals from Health and Disability services. This initiative was set up by the Centre de la Gabrielle <sup>vi</sup>. The professionals of the centre and the Institut Mutualiste Montsouris <sup>vii</sup>, working regularly with people with mental or psychiatric disabilities, confinement and illness, had witnessed the real ability in visual arts of individuals followed or accompanied. The association's aim is to enable people who are autodidacts, isolated or in a potential situation of exclusion (people with mental or psychiatric disabilities, confinement or illness) with a demonstrated ability in the visual arts to exhibit and sell their works (painting, drawing, sculpture, installation, photography and video). The association wants to raise the recognition by art and culture professionals, of artists whose situation makes it difficult to access cultural and art environments.

The centre 'Centre de la Gabrielle et des Ateliers du Parc de Claye' has been working with children, adolescents and adults with intellectual disabilities for the past 30 years. It was created by the 'Mutualité Fonction Publique' the French Federation of Mutual insurance companies for civil servants. Today, this service platform is made up of various specialised structures where 450 persons and their families find diversified solutions adapted to their needs. The centre includes 11 facilities that meet the needs of people with disabilities on a given territory: the Ile de France. The centre also acts as an Advisory Group on behalf of 'Mutualité Fonction Publique' and develops research on social innovations in the field of mental disability.

Even after Art Brut, Outsider Art, Art Singulier or Self-taught Art concepts led to the recognition of people with mental or psychological disabilities as legitimate artists, they still were unable to procure support through the regular channels to exhibit or sell their work. No existing structure could give them advice or help them to assert their rights. These self-taught artists with limited knowledge of specific artistic codes need support to understand the cultural and artistic language, to access recognition of professionals of arts and culture and to launch an artistic career. For example they may not be aware of their rights related to artistic property and may

accept the use of their works without being compensated. It is difficult for a person with a mental disability to know exactly what the market rates and the pricing of their works are, leading them to under or over estimate their works. In addition, persons under guardianship may find it difficult to convince their administrative supervisor to sell their works when they do not know the art world.

The ég'Art association was founded to allow people with intellectual or psychological disabilities to defend their artistic property and therefore be able to express themselves through their creation as other artists would. The ég'Art association acts as the agent for artists aiming to resolve specific problems related to the defence of legal interests of people with mixed abilities but also to deal with general problems in accessing the art market.

*viii.*  
*Actor of the social economy, the Paul Bennetot Foundation is a national nonprofit general interest organization. Its purpose is to facilitate mutual initiatives in innovation and improving the quality of service, enhance and disseminate innovative practices in the mutual movement. <http://www.fondationpaulbennetot.org/>*

Responding to a call for proposal from the Bennetot foundation <sup>viii</sup> (thematic: Quality of life and autonomy), a feasibility study for the creation of an association aimed to support artists with disabilities was launched. The project, set up by the Centre de la Gabrielle in partnership with the Institut Mutualiste Montsouris, hired an art project manager for that purpose. The feasibility study led to the creation of ég'Art Association in July 2010 through the following steps.

The preliminary study showed that professionals from the medico-social sector as well as the cultural sector were in favor of the project. An inventory of networks and partners revealed numerous potential partners who were geographically limited in their action. Eg'Art's first initiative was to integrate existing networks, create new ones to form a "talent scout" and spread information related to rights in the artistic field as well as identify artists with mental or psychic disabilities.

Eg'Art offers two types of support: The first one is a consulting support accessible to all; the second one is personalised support to identify potential exhibitions and sales channels. This work is carried out through mandated contracts and with the help of an artistic selection committee. The association, due to its genesis and mission, has a close relationship with mutual insurance companies, who support it financially since it was created. The decision-making bodies of the association, such as the board and the commission for people human rights, are mainly composed of leaders of mutual insurance companies or Health and Disability services.

Y was the first artist who received personalised support from ég'Art. He was 18 years old and already enjoyed significant recognition in New Zealand. Y had already sold a hundred paintings in his country before joining the ég'Art association but was seeking international recognition. However, good critics for his work in France had no knowledge of his disability because ég'Art ensures that artists' work is recognised for its merit and does not disclose such personal information in the first place. The association supports 11 artists. Amongst these, Y and three others are not French nationals. Y has already participated in nine exhibitions organized by ég'Art and sold several works.

Bernadette Grosyeux founded, with others, the Eg'Art association to allow people with mental disabilities to defend their artistic property and therefore express themselves as others by means of their creation. The Eg'Art association is an artist agent intended for resolving specific problems related to the defence of legal interests of people with intellectual or psychological disabilities but also for dealing with general problems in accessing the art market.



## STORYTELLING TO DRIVE CHANGE

Transitioning the artist into a wider community was made possible following on from the 'Enabling Good Lives' framework and new funding models of the New Zealand Health and Disability sector (Office for Disability Issues, 2103). 'Enabling Good Lives' vision was designed to remove barriers in providing differently abled people the life they aspire to. This vision entrusts community workers to identify higher level goals and aims of the people they serve and set in motion a plan that is sustainable to help them attain these goals. In the present case, responding to a strong artistic call made the goal identification stage obvious. Implementing success in an artist career, however, was a different challenge than implementing goals such as finding a flat or taking up a hobby.

Craemer (2009) reviewed the improved health and wellbeing societal benefits of arts for health projects as including reduction of social isolation. This is important because social isolation is a major morbidity and mortality risk factor, comparable to other well-documented ailments such as obesity, sedentary lifestyles, and possibly even smoking. Given that many arts for health projects involve group activities and may foster a sense of belonging to a group, it is reasonable to expect that these will result in some clear health benefits. Indeed the Konlaan, Bygren and Johansson (2000) Swedish study, a long-term study of arts attendance as a determinant of survival, tracked the health outcomes of over 10,000 individuals across 14 years, and reported a higher mortality risk for those people who rarely visited the cinema, concerts, museums, or art exhibitions compared with those visiting them most often.

A community organisation helped to fully activate the social benefits derived from the art world. Working alongside the artist, collaborators designed and implemented a strategy to reinforce the artist's ties with natural supports, i.e. those available in the community. This organisation implements a person-driven approach, providing support for individuals to access community activities including paid or volunteer work, work experience, further education and training, or recreational activities. People are supported to develop relationships within their surroundings so that they become less dependent on a day programme and have social aid for their community-based activities.

The research used a storytelling methodology (Lambert 2006) to understand impact and change. The data for this part of the research is stored in an online repository of video material including work sessions between the community worker and the artist. The aim of this joint work is to assist the artist in making lasting connections in the community to support his professional and personal aspirations. The material was (and still is) collected in an ongoing manner and provided the basis for a unique longitudinal data series. Describing and accounting for life changes can be difficult. We can, however, capture some of these powerful moments. Video material allowed the researcher to identify and qualify the impact that small changes can make (Janson et al 2011), hence it is well suited to the storytelling process.

The research question posed here addressed the understanding of change processes that a person undergoes to be able to articulate their vision of a good life and the steps to take to implement it. At the basis of articulating one's life vision is the ability to tell one's story. This process took about 3 months. As a start, some background

clips (Items 10 to 15 from the media list) provided for this community worker and future ones an introduction about the artist in some of his natural settings.

The storytelling intervention model was about deepening the connections between future professional goals and present personal action to help the artist understand what daily actions he could take to shape the successful career he wanted. It was crucial for him to understand that the momentum created around him needed to be sustained by his own actions. Since storytelling is fundamental to developing significant relationships, it was thought essential to help the artist articulate parts of his stories to deepen his networking connections as a result of face to face interactions. A community worker assisted the artist to produce a 'Digital Story' about himself.

*Illustration 6:  
Screenshot of the  
media list including the  
digital story with the  
artist telling his story*



Illustration 6 is a screenshot from the list of audio-visual materials in this series which unpack, amongst other things, the making of the artist's digital story (Items 2 to 6 from the media list). The storytelling methodology first afforded the opportunity to rehearse his introductory story for future face to face conversations. Secondly the resulting digital story (Item 1 from the media list) became a permanent artefact on the artist's website, affording him the opportunity to tell his story in his own voice. The usability advantage afforded by the technology did allow the communicator to record multiple versions before selecting the one that represented him. This digital story is the only recording with the artist's uninterrupted voice narrating his story to accompany his choice of photos. This represents a major milestone in the artist learning to introduce himself in face to face situations.

This part of the research will allow for the learning from this experience to be shared with community organisations. These materials are being reconfigured into novel training materials for staff working to assist differently abled artists (re) integrate their community and transition from the Health and Disability sector into the Community sector. This collection of interviews and filmed learning situations is ongoing and will constitute a unique longitudinal data series which will evolve with the artist's changing needs.

## A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

*'What stands out in my memory about Y's tertiary art study is the numerous exciting reactions from his mother. They were not about his art, but about achievements of a general nature which took her by surprise, achievements that would not have been achieved had he not been studying art at The Learning Connexion (TLC). A mother is forgiven to be subjective when it comes to evaluating a child's progress or achievement, however she is an educational psychologist and as a researcher is mindful and capable of objective observations.*

*Communication with someone on the Autism spectrum can be a challenge for someone like me, whose brain does not process information the way Y does. Matching a student's style of communication has been identified as one of the critical success factors for an inclusive art educational methodology (Baaijens 2011). This was easier said than done with Y. He is capable of good linguistic communications, but he clearly thinks and responds differently, often pausing to consider the meaning of what has been said, or checking if what has been said stacks up with what he already knows. His checking process differs from mine, his logic differs from mine. Y also continued checking after a conversation is finished and will remember everything you have said, whether it was correct or not. Y thinks a lot in absolutes. Something is either this or that, good or bad, winning or losing, right or wrong. This can make talking about art a tiring challenge, as so much is about possible interpretations and ambiguity.*

*Having an hour-long feedback session or conversation with a student is nothing unusual for a TLC Mentor, and so I did not think much of it when my phone sessions lasted that long with Y. That was until his mother called me with great surprise and joy in her voice telling me that "Before today, Y spoke with no-one that long on the phone, not even with close and much-loved family members overseas." It is in this context one can conclude that talking about art, his favourite subject made the difference. There were more phone calls from his mother of that nature.....*



*She never dared to hope that her son's art education would entice him to speak at length with his TLC Mentor about art on the phone or via Skype, hence we began to de-compartmentalise some of his rigid beliefs and absolute thinking.*

*Later I found myself pleasantly surprised when at a busy opening of his exhibition, he was mingling with the public, comfortably talking to strangers, answering their questions about his work. I knew this was a first for him. It was such a simple, yet profound moment that was a privilege to witness.*

*When teaching creative processes, I try to get students to engage both brain hemispheres for example by switching consciously between linguistic and visual communication and documentation. I did this also with Y when he presented a lengthy email of 17 pages with linguistic questions. I attempted to explore some of the questions through visual media. After the exploration he said that he now had a better understanding than before. It enabled Y to accept ambiguity, different meanings of the same word in different contexts. Art education aided Y with non-creative aspects of his life. One can begin to see creativity as a transferable skill, as an essential life skill that aids more than just artistic or creative development.*

*Art education was in this particular instance not only beneficial for Y, it also helped those around him better understand his mind as one of the many reactions from his mother illustrates:*

*"How do we develop the 'bridging method' to help us address family communication road blocks? Until now we perceived these as caused by Y's stubbornness. We sometimes reach deadlocks- situations in which we cannot overcome a [communication] obstacle. So we need a bridge. The block starts on the left side [of the brain]- there is a belief, a thought, a word, that block Y (and us) from developing further that holds him back. Until now we tried to address it from the left side- respond to words with other words, with rationale... but maybe a hop to the other side... images, context, bigger picture, creativity... (?) can help us resolve these communication blocks."*

*From early days of mentoring Y I expected that conceptual considerations were very much part of Y's work, even though he was unable to express such concepts linguistically. His painting style was often labelled 'naïve' and I heard calls for more 'sophisticated' painting techniques. I choose to be cautious, as I feared that such techniques could affect his expression in the same way that different words can change a poem. Attempting to change his style of painting in the name of art education could have caused the loss of insight into the functioning of his brain, his self-esteem, and his unique viewpoint of the world. His art is keyhole into his mind, a unique one that deserves respect.*

*It is clear from his artistic development that visual language and thus visual thinking and processing is very much part of his making sense of the world. His family has, thanks to art education, arrived at a similar conclusion and now sees creativity and right-side of the brain processes used by Y as a critical success factor in resolving any communication road blocks.*

*The documentary made about him illustrates beautifully that Y developed the skills to explain the concept underlying his work through linguistic communication. While discussing work with his auntie at an exhibition of his work, he was able to explain the motives behind his work. This fragment was proof that caution was warranted in*



*the early days. It was clear from the high number of art sales that Y was successful in connecting and thus communicating with his audience, especially those who bought his work. He was clearly doing it right. He could have concluded that there was something wrong with his own innate style if I had attempted to teach him different techniques back then, particularly at a time in his life when his absolute view of the world was still very strong. It would no doubt have come at a heavy price: his self-esteem.*

*Stimulation of growth and development in non-art aspects of a student's life can be a welcome benefit. When this is noticed in art students with mixed abilities, their art and creativity practice is often labelled as 'therapy' or 'therapeutic.' Art and creativity positively affects the well-being of students. TLC regularly conducts well-being surveys among its students. The recent survey in 2012 of 29 on site non-impaired students illustrated a remarkable increase of 53% in student's sense of well-being during their course. The average well-being at the start of their course was 82 and at the time of survey 125.5. All respondents recorded an equal or better sense of well-being at the time of survey. Increased non-art related benefits are thus not exclusive to differently abled students. The students are often denied access to art and creativity. When such access is made available, it is often wrongly presented purely as a health or therapeutic benefit. This is only so because they were denied access in the first place.*

*Many non-art related benefits can be cited in Y's case, but for him it did not stop there. He went on to become a successful artist at a young age. He has sold work world-wide and at respectable prices. His family as well as his TLC mentor have an international background, lived in multiple countries and can thus draw on a lived international experience. As a result they have a global outlook for Y and are not intimidated by international collaborations and opportunities. There is no hierarchy in their mind of 'make it nationally before going internationally'. International collaboration to increase Y's exposure as an artist was and is particularly relevant because he lives with autism. Audiences that will connect with his work may be less vast than any non-impaired artist may have. New Zealand is a country with a small population base and getting exposure to the work beyond its borders is critical for someone like him. Y has been fortunate to have such a supportive and enterprising family as many impaired artists who are cared for by care agencies that are often limited by regulations of what they can do for any particular individual.'*

## **CONCLUSION – REPLACING THE 'U' FROM 'AUTISTIC' WITH AN 'R'**

It is not possible to empirically generalise from Y's story. Rather the narrative methodology emphasises that the story told about a 'unique outcome' (White and Epston 1990) has the potential to act as a catalyst for change and inspire others by opening alternative narratives. Indeed according to White and Robson "Such work lends itself readily to interdisciplinary analysis as well as generating a richly detailed evocation of the process of the work, so that participants' tales become vital testimony [...] more than simply academic exercises, research is needed to generate new understanding in practical, accessible ways, recognising and utilising a range of types of evidence, and recognising the added value of globally expanded Knowledge Networks and communities" (2012: 17) and "...effective health promotion is more

than addressing topical health issues and priorities, but rather it is also about issues of identity, meaning and place –and these are essential factors in the development of arts in community health” (2012:18). This paper described the values, principles and research frameworks that inform the work spanning across four years and two countries. This discussion paper recounted the multidisciplinary interventions that took place in the public health, education and community-based arts in health contexts and described how inter-organisational and international collaborations emerged along the developmental pathway of the artist.

The family of the artist turned to the Health and Disability sector to access the funding necessary to act, but carried out the interventions in the education and community sectors, mirroring the interplay between the social and deficit models at play in this field (Swain, Finklestien, French and Oliver 1993). In retrospect, it was paramount to use the secondary school years to identify the artist’s passion because this passion was going to sustain the artist’s efforts throughout future years – in this sense, early identification work formed the foundation for later career development. It is common for teenagers to face difficult choices over early career decisions – however, autistic teenagers may not be able to solve these dilemmas before exiting a formal framework such as secondary school. In the latter case, the teenager may be left to him or herself, experience a series of failures and increasing stress levels and become dependent on social services or welfare handouts. Hence, as a methodological consideration, it is essential that families and professionals establish that foundational work during these critical secondary school years to enable a smooth(er) transition to the next stage in life – whether work or further studies.

The efforts to get the artist on track by addressing his specific challenges succeeded in bringing about meaningful engagement through communication work, some of which took place in community-based arts. This research reports on collaborations in Arts for Health projects going beyond a therapeutic path to a vocational mission. Analysis of survey data and published media about the artist traced back the growth of his professional recognition. This afforded the opportunity to unearth the teenager’s untapped talent and subsequently changed his life and that of his family. To the family, it became obvious that the ‘path of least resistance’ will take him down the specific art self-employment track – as opposed to seeking a job with an employer. Indeed there is abundant anecdotal evidence that the latter is fraught with social situation traps and multiple (and sometimes insoluble) challenges to people on the autistic spectrum. Collaborating teams referred to this clear professional direction as a lifeline.

Participatory arts projects often stress communal health benefits (Kasahara 2011) over individual career outcomes. This discussion paper reported professional benefits for the artist who grew to become a role model to his peers and described steps in his leadership development with knowledge that we hope will benefit the community sector.

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### **References for media files from illustrations**

The companion video files (over 47 min of interviews and audio-visual materials) quoted in this article are listed on one page at <http://tinyurl.com/unesco2013media>

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