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# UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts



Guest Editors

*Mike White*

*Margret Meagher*

*Dr. Sarah Atkinson*

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

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*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**

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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.

# Creative Progression: Reflections on quality in participatory arts

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## ABSTRACT

This paper takes *Creative Progression*, an arts programme whose aim was to support the progress of the homeless participants towards health, wellbeing and independent living, by Helix Arts (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK), as a case study through which to reflect on the meaning and assessment of quality in participatory arts. It considers the use of the word 'quality' by arts professionals, and the recent focus on 'excellence' in British cultural policy discourse, suggesting that the first term is often confused with 'good', partly because of uncertainty about concepts and partly because doing so may help to avoid potential challenges about values.

The paper then identifies five stages in a participatory arts process—conception, contracting, working, creation and completion—considering in turn some of the problems of defining or securing quality in performance, using the experience of the *Creative Progression* programme as a framework. It concludes by suggesting that, given the inevitably subjective nature of both arts practice and artistic experience, it is impossible to define fixed standards of quality in performance or outcome. Nor, indeed, would it be desirable to try to do so.

However, the quality of self-awareness and critical reflection exercised by artists working participatory contexts, and the extent to which that reflection is open to all participants, is central both to an ethically-defensible process and to the probability of programmes achieving their stated goals.

## KEYWORDS

*art and health, arts evaluation, participatory arts, community arts, artistic quality*

‘Come, give us a taste of your quality, Come, a passionate speech.’

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II, ii

## INTRODUCTION: ARTISTS, QUALITY AND PARTICIPATION

i  
*Max – A Musical  
Portrait Of Sir Peter  
Maxwell Davies* a  
film by Paul Joyce,  
broadcast on 15 July  
2011 on BBC4.

In *Max: A Musical Portrait of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies*, the 76 year old composer is asked about his remaining ambitions.<sup>i</sup> He takes a moment to answer the filmmaker’s question, before saying that he still hopes to write a piece of music with which he is completely happy. The desire to achieve an as yet unrealised excellence is shared by every artist because it is inherent to an honest creative practice. Those who question whether excellence matters to artists working in community or participatory practice show little understanding of artistic creation or seek to use an undefined concept as a slippery tool to criticise that practice (Mirza 2006:17). Either way, the question is a distraction from the challenges about quality, excellence and success that really do concern artists.

In practice, like Peter Maxwell Davis, most artists do not find it difficult to judge the quality of their own creative work. They know something is good, better than they have done yet, when it gives them an indefinable yet recognisable sense of satisfaction. No matter if next day or next year their ideas have changed and they now take for granted or even dislike what formerly delighted them. No matter either what someone else thinks of it. A critic cannot convince an artist that her work is good, if she does not believe it already. Likewise, artists often hold a secret faith in a piece, long after it has been slated by critics and ignored by audiences. An artist’s judgements of her own work cannot be considered ‘right’; nor can those of anyone else. But a restless and self-critical commitment to making and remaking such judgements is central to contemporary arts practice.

Of course, the use of terms such as ‘self-critical’, ‘judgement’ and even ‘art practice’ in the previous sentence skirts many philosophical, aesthetic and other difficulties, but they can legitimately be left to the artist and to critics where the creative work of individuals is concerned. It is much more difficult to do so when an artist’s practice involves work with other people, for purposes and within judgement frameworks

ii.  
<http://www.helixarts.com/pages/creativeprogressions.html> (verified 17.7.2013)

determined by yet others, notably those who pay for it. This essay explores some of these problems as they affect the assessment of quality in participatory arts and therefore the improvement of practice based on experience. It uses a Helix Arts programme as a case study through which to discuss some of these issues.

*Creative Progression* was a partnership between Helix Arts, a Newcastle-based arts development agency, and two charities working with homeless and vulnerably housed people in the city: Crisis Skylight and Tyneside Cyrenians. It was financed by Newcastle City Council and also involved Newcastle Anti-Social Behaviour Co-ordination Unit and Newcastle Mental Health. The principal goal of this work, as agreed between Helix and the homeless charities, was to support the progress of the homeless participants with chronic mental health problems towards health, wellbeing and independent living.<sup>ii</sup>

iii.  
Much of this work is available online:  
[http://www.helixarts.com/archive/creative\\_progression\\_resource.html](http://www.helixarts.com/archive/creative_progression_resource.html) (verified 17.7.2013)

The first stage of the programme involved film workshops run by Emily Barber and creative writing workshops by Bob Beagrie and Andy Willoughby, leading to public outputs in the form of a screening at Tyneside Cinema and publication of *The Hidden City*. Some of this writing also featured in the national homelessness magazine, *The Big Issue*. The writing group went on to produce a play, *The Great North Rnu* (pronounced 'renew'), which was given a rehearsed reading at the Learning Space of Newcastle Theatre Royal in September 2010.<sup>iii</sup> A second phase of the work focused on 3D design and making, with workshops, led by glass artist Sarah Blood and artist-designer, Dan Civico. The results of this phase were presented in an exhibition at Crisis Skylight.

The whole programme was supported by an exemplary commitment to reflective practice, including internal and external evaluation and regular meetings in which artists, Helix Arts staff, representatives of the homeless charities and others discussed experience and progress. The final part of this process was a seminar held in Newcastle on 14 July 2011, involving Bob Beagrie, Sarah Blood and Dan Civico (*Creative Progression* programme artists), Diane Stewart (Tyneside Cyrenians), Frances Arnold, Toby Lowe and Kate Roebuck (Helix Arts), Kate Sweeney and Phyllida Shaw. I was invited by Helix Arts to observe the discussion as someone with no previous involvement in the programme, and an earlier version of this paper was shared with all the participants as a result. I am grateful to them all for allowing me to listen to their conversation and for subsequent comments and feedback on my reflections.

## QUALITY AND OBJECTIVITY

iv.  
<http://www.helixarts.com/pages/home.html> (verified 17.7.2013)

Before considering some of those aspects of quality in the context of *Creative Progression*, it is necessary to consider a conceptual issue and clarify, at least for present purposes, what is meant by 'quality'. In the arts, the word is often used as an equivalent to 'good', as in the statement Helix Arts makes about its purpose on its website:

*Helix Arts works with artists, in partnership with public and voluntary sector organisations, to create opportunities for people to participate in high quality arts activity.*<sup>iv</sup>

v.  
<http://www.cardiff.gov.uk/content.asp?av=2%2C2868%2C2963%2C2973>  
(verified 17.7.2013)

Helix is not unusual in using the term 'high quality art' in this way. Here, for example, is what Cardiff City Council says about its arts team, which:

*Aims to develop and increase opportunities for attendance and participation in arts and cultural activities in the city and to assist in the delivery of high quality art.*<sup>v</sup>

The problem with these statements, and similar ones found in the grant applications, evaluations and annual reports of many arts organisations, is that they use an objective term, 'quality', in place of a subjective term, 'good'. In doing so, they obscure, however unintentionally, the need to define the criteria against which a subjective term must be assessed. In philosophy—and it is impossible to talk about the value of art without recourse to philosophy—quality is a characteristic of things: it does not determine their value. As the literary critic, John Carey, argues:

*Value [...] is not intrinsic in objects, but attributed to them by whoever is doing the valuing.* (Carey 2005:xii)

Thus 'hardness' is a quality (a characteristic) of metal: the *value* of metal depends on the function for which it is being used. A hard metal drill is better than a soft one; a hard metal sheet may not be, if it is to be used for roofing, where the softness of lead is valued. Hardness can be measured and compared. It does not change unless the metal of which it is a characteristic is changed. It is an objective quality of metal. Assessments of quality cannot be made independently of specific criteria, which may relate to concepts such as usefulness, effectiveness or, in the case of art, aesthetics. It would not be meaningful to speak of the quality of a homelessness project except with reference to its success criteria (in the case of *Creative Progression*, a person's health and wellbeing, capacity for independent living and housing security). The same is true of an arts programme. It cannot be judged good (or bad), unless the concept 'good' is defined. Good for what? Good for whom? Good in comparison with what?

In the arts, quality is often used as a proxy for 'good' or 'excellent' because those terms may be seen as suspect in a society aspiring to democracy and uncertain about its common values in an age of fluid, competing ideologies. Hence the relief with which parts of the British arts world greeted the 2008 McMaster report, *Supporting Excellence in the Arts*, commissioned by the Department for Culture Media and Sport, even though its central concept was very vaguely defined:

*Excellence in culture occurs when an experience affects and changes an individual. An excellent cultural experience goes to the root of living* (McMaster 2008:9).

Change, like quality, is a neutral term. The extent of its desirability depends on the nature of a change. McMaster's definition does not envisage the possibility that an artistic experience may change someone's experience of living for the worse, if only by inducing deep boredom. In current arts discourse, the word quality can be a way of saying 'good' that is understood by some without offending anyone else. After all, it is difficult to be against quality as such, especially if it is not defined. This masking of judgements gives power to the professionals whose knowledge and engagement secures them extensive control over their field. The use of phrases such as 'high quality art' is dangerous because it makes it harder to discuss and determine the value of arts practice, while also tending to exclude those who believe themselves less able than professionals to recognise quality in art. Since these are very often the

marginalised people that organisations such as Helix Arts exist to engage, this would be an especially problematic result.

Is there an alternative? In his 1974 'Inquiry into Values', *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert M. Pirsig expresses the underlying problem well:

*'Quality ... you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. But that's self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is, they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof! There's nothing to talk about. But if you can't say what Quality is, how do you know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists? If no one knows what it is, then for all practical purposes it doesn't exist at all. But for all practical purposes it really does exist. What else are the grades based on? Why else would people pay fortunes for some things and throw others in the trash pile? Obviously some things are better than others ... but what's the "betterness"? ... So round and round you go, spinning mental wheels and nowhere finding anyplace to get traction. What the hell is Quality? What is it?' (Pirsig 1974:184)*

Relativism responds to this challenge by arguing that the subjective nature of human experience negates even the possibility of definitive judgement. But relativism—the denial of absolutes—is logically inconsistent since it accepts as absolute the principle of non-contradiction (Kołakowski 1999). A more practical objection to it would be that unchecked subjectivity is of limited use in guiding human action, whether in art or anything else. And, as Pirsig says, we do know that some things are better than others, just as artists know when they have done good work. His concept of 'betterness' is another place to start looking at quality and participatory arts. We may not be able to define excellence, but we can certainly identify good and less good, admirable and acceptable.

How could that be done in practice? As already noted, one problem in assessing the quality of participatory arts work arises from its nature as a process with multiple actors: artists, participants, managers, support workers, funding bodies and so on. It might be easier to consider quality in this process by looking separately at each phase of a participatory art process. So the rest of this paper considers quality in five stages of a process: conception, contracting, working, creation and completion.

## **STAGE 1: QUALITY IN CONCEPTION**

The first step in any project is theoretical—thinking through an idea that might become a piece of work. That means drawing on a range of conscious and less conscious theories, beliefs and assumptions, in turn based on past experience and learning. It is worth saying this because the theoretical basis of participatory arts is not always very strong or very clear. Much less has been written about it than other areas of contemporary art and it does not benefit from rich critical and academic discourse. Without such support, artists and other practitioners can find the process of formulating projects in a context of professional practice problematic. They may also find it more difficult to negotiate with partners, within and beyond the arts, who do have a strong theoretical basis for action (Matarasso 2013). In the case of *Creative Progression*, the concept of progression itself was central to the work of the homelessness charities with which Helix Arts worked. But is this concept of personal change also central to participatory arts practice?

vi.  
<http://www.findyourtalent.org/news/2009/12/community-graffiti-art-project-combats-antisocial-behaviour> (verified 17.7.2013) It is unfortunate that British policy has become used to a term once used primarily in the Soviet Union to describe dissidents and those who resisted its tyranny.

Although contemporary ideas about the transformative purpose of art may be traced to Kantian aesthetics or even earlier, they are generally associated with ideas of individual *self*-improvement (Belfiore & Bennett 2008). Whatever we make of those, they are different from the concepts of social change, whether at an individual or group level, associated with participatory arts in the minds of many funding bodies. Here, it might be argued that, in contrast with the reasoning behind, say, the subsidy of orchestral music, the calculation is both simpler and more coercive: funding will be given in return for a change in lifestyle, a reduction in what policymakers describe—as ‘antisocial behaviour’.<sup>vi</sup> Plato might have approved this use of art for social instruction, or even state-promoted conformism, but how far should artists today act as its agents?

How far, indeed, are artists *able* to act as agents of social instruction? Uncertainty of outcome is a characteristic of art practice. An artist cannot guarantee the success of an idea, a task or even a project, although, if working with others, they might be expected to guarantee the standard of their processes. This is even clearer when the outcome, such as an improvement in a person’s social situation, is not in the artist’s control. Every experience of art is an interaction between creator (artist) and recreator (audience or participant) in which each has partial control over the experience and the meaning made of it. So the relationship between an artistic activity and the lifestyle change that a homelessness charity works to support is impossible to guarantee at an individual level.

There is a parallel here with health care. No medical treatment is effective in every case because humans are living, active beings, not passive machines. They interact with treatment, even as they interact simultaneously with many other influences in their lives, and the outcomes will be affected by each and by the interaction between them (Servan-Schreiber 2011). Nor do we understand, let alone control, the influences that may affect how a person responds to treatment. Such complexity makes individual health outcomes unpredictable, so medicine uses probability to forecast results and inform necessary decisionmaking. From the outcomes of thousands of individual treatments, medical researchers can reliably predict that the same treatment will produce, say, a five-year survival rate in 40% of similar cases. In social policy, where unknowable influences have a far greater effect than in medicine, such approaches would be both more appropriate and more useful than those currently employed in British arts policy and management and promoted through various evaluation toolkits.

The theoretical weakness of participatory arts also presents obstacles for a ‘theory of change’ approach to evaluation, which seeks a rationale as to why a particular action can reasonably be expected to result in a specified outcome. In the case of *Creative Progression*, the question might be why should making furniture or writing a play be expected to improve a person’s housing situation? There are several reasonable answers to this question but unless they are being considered in the conception and planning of a project, there is no way of testing the quality or value of any proposed activities nor, in the longer term, of improving practice within an organisation.

For example, what is the most effective length of time for an intervention of the type planned by *Creative Progression*? The programme itself was long, extending in two cycles over 24 months. But the taster sessions for furniture and glass making

were short, and the artists involved felt that some participants gained as much from these as from the following 16 weeks of work. Six hours of energy, excitement, focus and limited commitment worked well for some people. It is also in the nature of the arts to produce transformative experiences that are less common in, for example, adult education, whose benefits tend to be cumulative. The intensity of a single night at the theatre can change the course of a person's life. For these reasons, having a clear articulation of how and why specific arts interventions are expected to result in change is an essential theoretical basis both to this work and to evaluation of its quality.

## STAGE 2: QUALITY IN CONTRACTING

The issue of contracting is another area that receives less attention than it might in participatory arts practice. Yet establishing the terms of engagement is essential to a practice that is concerned with the creation of meaning, with ethical relations between human beings and with social power. Negotiations between arts organisations, funding bodies and organisations delivering social programmes are common, though they generally focus on matters of service delivery and remuneration, rather than ethics or practice. The agreements established with participants are subtler and more complex. Artists negotiate them as part of everyday workshop practice and successful handling of this aspect of the work is a key skill expected of practitioners in participatory arts.

*Creative Progression* highlights the difference between the approach of homelessness charities and that of arts organisations in contracting. Care and support services are able to establish clear ethical contracts with users because the people they support have come for help in making a change in their lives. Both parties accept avoidance of behaviours that undermine progress towards that change as essential to their agreement. Commitment to specific goals, such as keeping a home of one's own, and a shared understanding of what that involves, such as avoiding alcohol, is the basis of the relationship.

But is this the kind of contract that Helix Arts is able or wishes to create with the people who become involved in its work? While participating in its programmes may have beneficial results for individuals, those programmes are not designed with a remedial purpose and still less on the basis of a mutually agreed diagnosis. On the contrary, Helix speaks of a creative process of empowerment that is essentially concerned with using art as a means of personal and social questioning:

vii.  
*What is High-Quality Participatory Arts?*  
Helix Arts Internal Discussion Paper, 10 October 2010.

*Helix Arts believes that Participatory Arts is a creative process which creates a space for artists to work with participants in 'the co-production of meaning'. It empowers people to reflect on the cultures they are part of, and which have helped to form their identity. It enables people to explore the narratives of their lives and to find new ways to articulate their view of the world.* vii

These ideas can be partly recognised in aspects of *Creative Progression*, especially perhaps in the writing strand, which was well suited to enabling people to reflect on their own experiences and social situations and express the results creatively. But they sit less easily with the idea of progression because they imply a different kind of contract in which personal change is *not* a condition of access to participation.

The homelessness charities' practice of risk assessing each person for each workshop suggests further differences. Whilst an artist can be expected to assess the risks inherent in working with others (e.g., in the use of tools for glass work), should they also consider the case history of individual participants? The *Creative Progression* artists generally preferred to know only what participants people themselves chose to share with them. Discussion of contracts, whether written, verbal or even, perhaps, unspoken, can open up questions of power central to the practice of participatory arts. It matters who knows what about whom, how access to participation is granted or denied, the responsibilities associated with taking part and the nature of the consent that is secured. Who decides what is good (the criteria of quality) is another critical aspect of this contracting. Unless the people who are supposed to benefit from an activity can participate in defining the criteria of its success, then control remains firmly with the professional organisations and any claim of empowerment must be open to question.

### **STAGE 3: QUALITY IN WORKING**

If there are ambiguities in identifying quality in theory or contracting, these fall away when one turns to the quality of process through which the *Creative Progression* programme was delivered. On all sides this showed Helix Arts' practice at its best, with gifted artists being well supported to deliver rewarding arts experiences. That excellence was evidenced by the great care given to planning and preparation of a workshop practice that was well founded in skill, theory and experience.

It has been argued that it is not possible to guarantee the results or outcomes of an artistic process: even great artists produce bad work, sometimes a great deal of it. So it was never possible for the artists in the *Creative Progression* programme to be sure that the poetry, films and sculptural objects that would be produced through their work would be of a high artistic quality, when compared appropriately with other work. But a failure of outcome is different from and may be unconnected to a failure of process. Good conception, planning, process and practice can still lead to art products that are not good in themselves, although they increase the probability of a successful outcome.

Bad failure, from which it is hard both to learn and to move forward, is associated with poor conception and planning, with not knowing or not caring about the lessons of other people's experience, with unrecognised incompetence or inaptitude in the face of what one has set out to do, with arrogance, pride or foolishness. Bad failure is not unusual in human experience, but human beings, who have such a deep need of self worth, often go to great lengths to disguise bad failure by persuading themselves (and if possible others) that it was not due to their own incompetence or bad faith, but to unforeseeable and uncontrollable circumstances or, at least, to the failures of others.

Good failure, on the other hand, really is associated with unforeseeable and uncontrollable circumstances and can be encountered even by people who think, research and plan well, who take advice from well-informed sources, who approach their work thoughtfully, carefully and with fitting humility, who have taken time to build skills, competence and aptitude, and who remain always alert to the possibility

viii.  
*The Producers*,  
film script, Mel  
Brooks, 1967.

of their own or other errors. In the arts, good failure happens when a creative team full of talent and past success works for months on a new play or musical only to know, inexplicably on opening night, that it just does not work. As Mel Brooks puts it in *The Producers*, comically perverting the normal calculations of Broadway: 'If he were certain the show would fail, a man could make a fortune'.<sup>viii</sup>

The difference between good failure and bad failure is that, disappointed though they may be by the outcome, people generally do not regret having taken part in a project that has not worked, because they know or feel it has been done well. Good failures can be a foundation to build on. Bad failures just make people slink away and hide; they have no friends and no parents. Good failures nurture progression: bad failures foster depression.

The point for quality of process is that it is possible to identify the characteristics—the objective qualities—that need to be in place to ensure a good participatory arts process, even though one cannot guarantee that the final performance or exhibition will be a success. The *Creative Progression* artists showed, through the care with which they undertook the conception, planning and execution of workshop programmes, that a good quality process can form a reliable precondition for creating good art.

## STAGE 4: QUALITY IN CREATION

Participatory arts projects are about making art, though this evident point is sometimes forgotten. When it is, projects risk becoming a form of adult education for people who do not attend adult education classes, focussed on individual progress, notably through the acquisition of skills and confidence. While that is a common outcome of good participatory arts practice, such progress is not its purpose, which is primarily to involve people in opportunities to create art. So the criteria for quality in creation must relate to those that apply to the arts generally, including aesthetics, technical ability, innovation and the intellectual and emotional satisfaction offered by the completed work. Does it, in short, offer an artistically satisfying experience both in its own terms and in the wider context of what is considered to be good in the arts today?

Again, this is an area in which *Creative Progression* achieved good results. The writing, films, glasswork and furniture were all of a high standard. To put that statement into context, the design work in particular would have fitted well in an art college graduation show. The products that the homeless participants produced in weekly sessions over a few months stand comparison with that of young designers studying fulltime for three years. That is not to say that they were the same: they were not and the way each piece reflected its creators' ideas and experience is another criterion of quality. But a degree show would be a fair benchmark against which to assess it. There is not such an obvious benchmark for the writing, but it compared well, though again being different, with what might be read in most writers' groups who tend to have much more experienced and committed members.

One question that arises from this assessment, however, is how important these artistic concerns are to the homelessness organisations in the project. Would it matter to them if the artwork were bad, provided people's lives were changed through

the process? It may be easier to answer that question if we look at the other part of creation, namely presenting work to an audience. After all—and this is another reason why participatory art is not a form of adult education—art is meant to be shared, to be experienced by another person than the artist.

All the work made through *Creative Progression* was formally presented to audiences, generally invited rather than public. In the case of the writing this was through an evening of readings at the Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society and a rehearsed reading of the play at the Theatre Royal, while the visual artwork was exhibited at the Crisis centre. The films were shown at a local cinema, and much of the work has also been published online. Several participants found this part of the process the most difficult aspect of their involvement and the artists remained uncertain about whether it had been right to do this. In the event, though they experienced stress at the idea of presenting their work, all the participants coped well and were pleased afterwards to have done it, with several wanting to do more performances. The presentations were successful because they represented an independent validation of their effort, learning and creativity. It enabled them to communicate not just their ideas and experiences but also the kind of persons they now were and how their lives were changing. The sense of achievement they gained was intrinsic to the quality of their creative work and people's reactions to it.

This issue also returns to the questions of control and informed consent. Who decides whether there should be a public presentation? Who is protecting whom, and from what? One of art's most important lessons is that failure is normal and survivable: it is what makes not failing so special. To offer participants, in the name of empowerment, a process that protects them from such realities could be thought perverse. Whatever their personal histories or ability, participants are entitled to the opportunity to take part in a full artistic process, comparable to those offered to people who do not experience social disadvantages. They should also have the right to choose to opt out at any point, as can anybody involved in an arts project, while still accepting the responsibility that doing so may bring, for instance in letting other people down. Anything less is to treat people as if they needed others to make their decisions for them (which is only true in ce. It would ultimately be to construct a social arts ghetto, alongside the employment, housing, health and other ghettos in which they already live.

## **STAGE 5: QUALITY IN COMPLETION**

Even long initiatives such as *Creative Progression* come to an end: how they end is another important aspect of their quality, since it can influence the meaning and therefore the result of everything that has gone before. Collaborative artistic work can be intense, even within the professional field where performers are used to going from the intimacy of daily work with colleagues to lonely days at home, waiting for a phone call. An abrupt withdrawal of creative opportunities, even if known about long in advance, may leave participants with little do and wondering whether others placed the same value on the project as they did themselves. At worst, people may feel they have been lied to or used, and that the promises and new opportunities spoken about have been withdrawn. Bad participatory arts projects have been known to create, rather than reduce, mistrust and cynicism.

*Creative Progression* avoided such problems, partly because of the care invested in planning and delivering the process and partly thanks to the quality of Helix Arts' relationships with both Crisis and the Cyrenians. These are longterm and continuing partnerships, based on shared values and a developing understanding of one another's needs. As a result, continuing support, and routes for progression, existed for the project participants. The partners were also strongly committed to learning from the experiences gained through the programme. In addition to the normal evaluation systems used by Helix Arts, and the continuing review of both homelessness charities, resources were invested into a full day review involving the artists, Helix staff and board members, staff from the Cyrenians and an independent reviewer (the present writer). Bringing together most of the professionals involved with an informed outsider allowed for a rich and honest discussion, but at the expense of not involving any participants in this stage of the discussion. The challenge of opening up a professional discourse to non-professionals lies at the heart of arts evaluation, just as it does in participatory arts practice itself.

Seeing the completion of a project as a time for review of what has been done, and for planning what might come next, is key to bringing a successful project to a successful end. Reflection, including informal discussion and evaluation itself, brings the project cycle back to its theoretical starting point with the intention of testing its own practice and the theory from which it developed (Matarasso 1995). Quality in this respect might mean ensuring that there is an appropriate and effective evaluation process in place from the start. Once again we must ask whose perspectives that evaluation reflects and whose interests it serves. Artists, arts agency, homelessness charity and participants themselves may each have different, though not incompatible, aspirations for the project. The extent to which these are recognised and considered is one criterion of the quality of an evaluation. Others include the value of the knowledge produced in relation to the cost of producing it; the credibility of its findings to different stakeholders; and its capacity to produce applicable and transferable learning.

Planning future activities follows naturally on evaluation, but might have to start before an evaluation can be completed. People may need to consider their own next steps in accordance with various personal and institutional timetables. For instance, if they are going to pursue new interests in college, they have to sign up at the start of the academic year; or they may just need to have something to do next week to ensure that there is no loss of momentum. Again, the quality of the project should be assessed in part on how well these issues are handled.

## CRITICALITY AND OPENNESS

There are many traps for the unwary hoping to track down quality in participatory arts practice. One would need genius not to fall into at least some of them and this essay has certainly not avoided them all. But it is not the traps that matter most. It is the quality of the thinking that everyone involved in participatory practice can share. There are no answers, because there is no 'correct' way of undertaking arts practice. We are beings whose experience, however deeply and frequently it is shared, remains personal and subjective. But there is the hope and possibility of doing better, both in practice and in how we think about and discuss practice. We are subjective, but there is all the difference in the world in whether or not we test our subjectivity by trying to step outside it. For some reason, the best historians have often been good at recognising this paradox and this responsibility. As Ian Kershaw says:

*Objective criteria resting on the historian's 'neutrality' arguably play no part in any historical writing. Selection on the basis of subjectively determined choices and emphases is inescapable. A rigorous critical method and full recognition of subjective factors shaping the approach deployed and evaluation of the findings provide the only means of control. (Kershaw 2008:291)*

What matters then is the quality of self-awareness and critical reflection artists bring to their work: that is central to all truly honest creative practice. But when they work with others, particularly in community-based or participatory contexts, there is the further challenge of ensuring that the critical reflection, and the definition of success, is opened to all participants. There are many ways of doing this, as there are many approaches to participatory arts practice. Possibilities include giving participants a formally recognised role in the evaluation process or using the creative activity itself as a way to promote inquiry and gather data. Whatever solutions may be found, but addressing this challenge is central both to an ethically-defensible process and to the probability of programmes achieving their goals.

Image 1 – Chandelier  
(Creative Progression)  
Photograph  
Sarah Blood



Image 2 – ‘Elephant  
Yes’ by David Paull-  
Kidd, Dan Civico &  
Sarah Blood (Creative  
Progression)

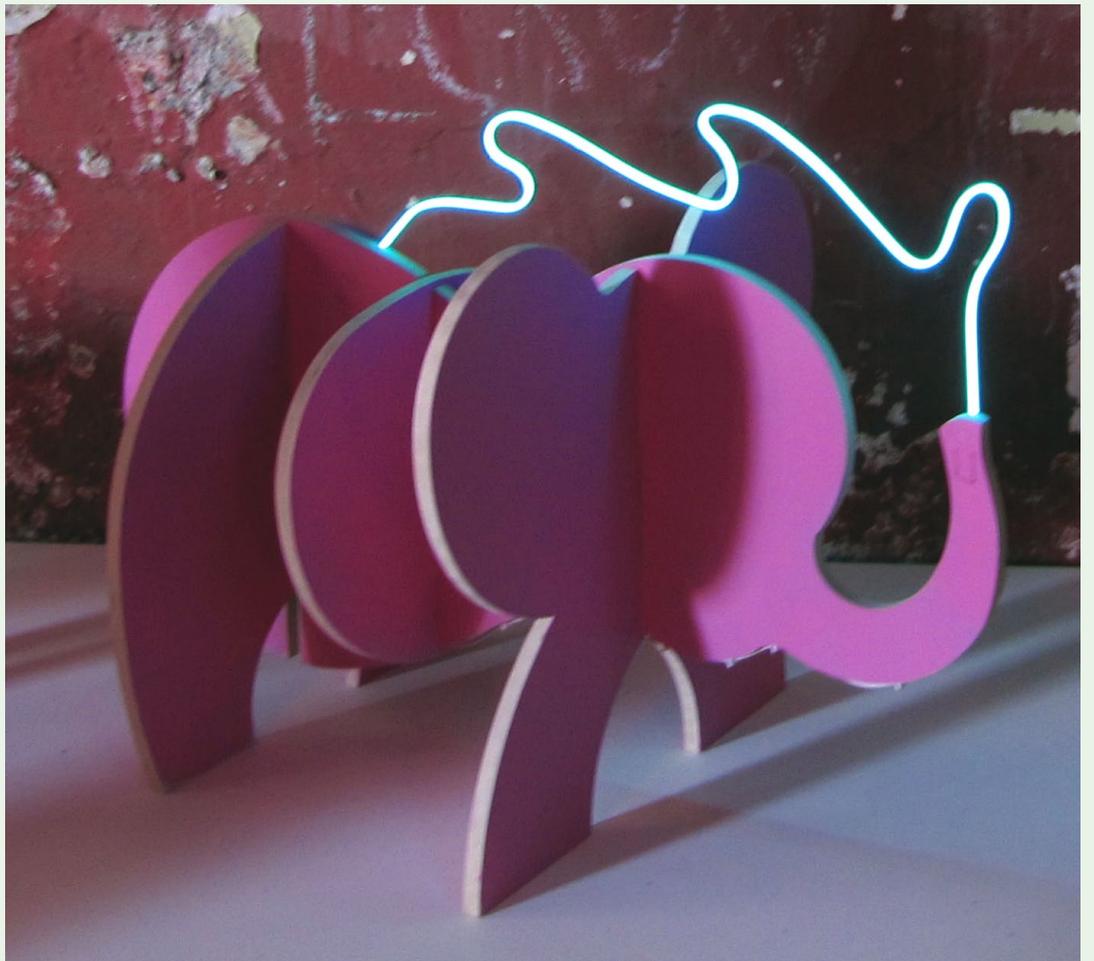


Image 3 –  
Cartographies map  
image by Drew on  
Creative Progression

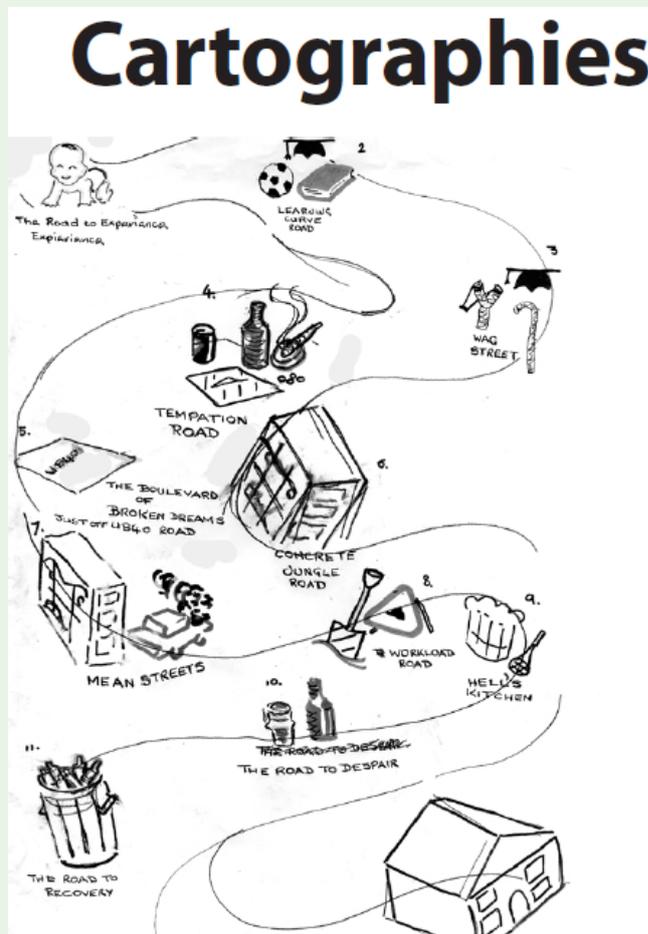


Image 4 – Body  
Mapping poem by David

### Body Mapping

These hands have held new born babies.  
 These feet know what it's like to walk away from drink.  
 These arms once held my parents and sister before I caused trouble.  
 This nose knows the smell of art room paint and my sweat.  
 These knees have been kicked and bruised playing football.  
 These shoulders carry a lot of stress and worry.  
 These fingers are long, good for goal keeping.  
 This spine is a bridge between my head and my knees.  
 This stomach has felt the burn of alcohol; happy one minute, sick the next.  
 These eyes have seen both parents' bodies and the bodies of residents.  
 This head rules the heart with the opposite sex.  
 These taste buds have tasted strong Thai curries and sugary drinks.  
 These ears have heard bells, cars and trains, the noise of shouting  
 At parents and people teaching me how to live my life.  
 This mind holds memories of the past and looks into the future with trepidation.

David

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