

After You Are Two

*Exemplary practice
in participatory arts
with older people*

Kate Organ

The Baring Foundation

“You always know after you are two. Two is the beginning of the end.”

J. M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*

About The Baring Foundation

The Baring Foundation is an independent grant maker which began funding arts organisations and projects within the broad theme of Arts and Older People in 2010. Its programme of direct support and strategic interventions has included:

- A programme of grants to support collaborations between arts organisations and care settings.
- Specific publications and papers (including this one) to inform and encourage the sharing of ideas and to provoke debate and reflection on arts practice within both the arts and cultural sector and the wider social care agendas of an ageing society.
- Partnerships such as the collaboration with the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, whose travel fellows have been exploring arts and older people in other parts of the world.
- Supporting the establishment of Luminate – Scotland’s Creative Ageing Festival and the development of Capital Age Festival in London.
- Commissioning Age of Creativity – a website forum for the sharing of information.
- Round table discussions bringing artists, participants, funders, commissioners and policy leaders together.
- Support for Creative Ageing a national conference in partnership with Manchester City Council in 2011 and for Bealtaine’s Creating A New Old Conference in Dublin in 2012.

About the Author

Kate Organ began working in the arts as an actor and co-founder of Jubilee Arts in the Black Country. She went on to direct theatre and TV projects with young people and multi-generational casts. As Director of the Birmingham Readers and Writers Festival in the 1980s and 90s she established new territory for literary festivals. Aiming to develop new formats and contexts for diverse voices and audiences, as well as bringing national and international attention to Birmingham as an emerging cultural city.

From 1995 to 2003 Kate worked at West Midlands Arts, where she led on Theatre, Performing and Combined Arts and the development of the region's International Arts Policy. She was the UK juror for the European Union's Cultural programme, and worked with the International Society for Performing Arts, producing two world congresses for them.

Since 2003, Kate has provided interim management for several arts organisations, and evaluated diverse projects to inform arts practice and policy at regional and national levels. As a trained facilitator and coach she supports individuals, teams and boards of arts organisations including providing workforce and partnership development support for the national singing programme – Sing Up.

Kate has been a freelance Arts Advisor to The Baring Foundation since 2007. In 2012 she began a period of research into arts and older people with a Winston Churchill Travel Fellowship.

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Introduction

In writing this I have drawn on examples of work by arts organisations recently or currently supported by The Baring Foundation. In my capacity as an adviser to the Foundation, I visited, observed, joined in, read reports and talked to many people involved in these projects – participants and artists, co-ordinators and producers, and people who had hosted the projects at care homes, in schools, community centres and arts venues. I also joined a choral project involving mixed generations (aged 13 to over 70) from different cultural backgrounds. For the first time in many years I was a voluntary participant in an art form in which I have no training. I felt what it was like to be one of the participants, led by professional choral leaders facilitating us in the creation of new songs for a public concert.

My conversations and observations of artists and participants have drawn me to reflect on my own experience as a practitioner in the community arts movement of the 1970s and 1980s, through to the policy concerns of the 1990s and 2000s, and in the wider context of arts development today.

The main difficulty in drawing authoritative conclusions about “exemplary practice” in Arts with Older People is that there is huge diversity in what we call arts – in how artists work, what they make, the context in which and for which art is made and how it is received and understood. Above all, the term Older People cannot and should not be imagined to refer to any idea of a homogenous group.

I will assert my firm belief, though, that artists working in participatory arts contexts need to remember that their role is to be an artist – to bring their skills and processes to reveal how it sounds, looks and feels to be in the world, in the past, now and to the end of life. By collaborating with older people they share their skills and knowledge of artistic processes. The contexts and locations for this arts practice may seem dominated by and designed for activities other than art. The “needs” of the older person are frequently defined by other people and they may have presumed that the act of being creative isn't in itself a need. The best work I have seen involves an honest pact between the artists and the older participants – to allow arts processes to explore and express what really concerns the whole person and to bring that awareness and identification to others.

My findings will hopefully provoke arts practitioners, whether professional or voluntary participants at any stage of the journey of ageing, to consider what can happen when people are fully included in, and agents of, the nation's cultural life for their whole lifetime.

Across five themed sections I found issues long-debated by artists working in participatory arts are still current and relevant:

- Section 1** Is the process as important as the product?
- Section 2** What is the relationship of reminiscence and life story work to arts in older age?
- Section 3** What role does participatory arts with older people have in the wider public realm?
- Section 4** Who is in control – the artist or the participant?
- Section 5** Is it useful to think of a field of practice that specialises in Arts and Older People?

My main conclusions are:

- A rigid insistence on process over product can deny the arts participant the chance to experience the necessary processes that go towards making art that can have power and meaning for others. However, striving too prescriptively or too rapidly for an end product can result in closing down the exploratory stages of creativity too soon and to a too limited or poor execution. I prefer to think in the same terms as any other arts processes – a research and development (R&D) phase, which might go forward to a stage when something is made, tested, framed, curated and presented in an appropriate context. Above all the process/ product divide is about two artistic endeavours, not a process which is confused with care or therapy, both of which have their own processes and outcomes.
- An emphasis on memory work within arts practice with older people is not compulsory as an end, or a means to an end, or a measure of success. Tapping into memories needs permission and purpose and is best done in a spirit of reciprocity. Life stories can offer an enriching understanding of all our histories, our present times and our futures. Works of art are frequently biographical but, to become meaningful beyond the specific biographer, there needs to be an element that goes beyond the past and into the present and offers a sense of future too.
- If the memory capacity is weakening, activities which depend on memory may be unwelcome and stressful. The value of arts for participants with memory loss and dementia may lie more in the pleasures of agency and sensory experiences in the moment.
- Art is a vital agent to public discourse. The voices and imagination of older generations have a vital part to play in shaping understanding and decision-making in the public realm. Our culture does not revere and celebrate old age as some do. There is still a huge value to the aim of placing the means of expression in the hands of those least listened to.
- There are no limits to the kind of art or art form that might be appropriate at any age or stage of life. The quality of the materials, the equipment, the relationships, the space, the time and the imagination, will maximise the purposefulness and effectiveness of those choices.
- Choice needs to be at the heart of participatory arts processes. For many people choices diminish in older age. The responsibility remains on all involved in participatory arts to expand choices, make choice a strong principle in all activities. But to make art we must encounter the unfamiliar and avoid limiting assumptions. This requires trusting and trustworthy relationships.

- The power relationships between the professional artists and the participant can be shared and negotiated by many different means – enshrined in protocols, brokered through honest and clear choices, explored through adult to adult dialogue and, where necessary, guessed at through acute and humane listening, observation and communication skills.
- In our early years we play, explore the world through every sense, try to depict it and communicate it to others. Some of these childlike approaches are at the heart of the act of making art. As we grow out of infancy we gain self-awareness but become more concerned with autonomy and dignity. The relationship between playfulness and activities that are appropriate in infancy and those which are comfortable in adulthood at any age needs careful consideration.
- Ageing is a fact of life. A growing population of people living longer is a phenomenon of our times, affecting many aspects of everyone’s lives. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights article 27 enshrines the “right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community [and] to enjoy the arts.” At different stages of life we need to adjust how we can practise that right.
- A specialised field of arts practice and policy may be necessary to nudge those adjustments into life. Its value will lie in the extent to which it enables us through artistic insights to value and accept ageing in all its diversity and avoid ghettos and segregation without freedom and choice.

Definitions

■ Participatory arts and its sisters and its cousins and its aunts

After You Are Two looks at examples involving the professionalised arts sector, but I acknowledge that it is a relatively small seam of activity within the expressive lives of older people. Participation within the amateur/voluntary arts sector involves many people of all ages, far exceeding the numbers that collaborate with professional artists. Research undertaken in 2011 by Third Sector Research Sector (TSRS), Voluntary Arts and Exeter and Birmingham Universities found that:

'There are currently more than 49,000 amateur arts groups in England with an estimated 5.9 million members, in addition 3.5 million people volunteer as extras or helpers making a total of 9.4 million participants in activities'.

The amateur/voluntary arts sector therefore plays a very important part in the cultural lives of individuals and communities, particularly those living furthest from the metropolitan centres of the UK, where the professional arts are most developed and where the vast majority of commercial and public arts investment is directed. I also acknowledge that the distinctions between amateur and professional are blurred and often gloriously so in retirement.

The work of professional artists working with non-professionals in the UK has enjoyed various names: community arts, participatory arts, applied arts and relatively recently collaborative arts. These different names denote various nuances of assumptions about processes, contexts, purposes and outcomes. Over several decades the broad field has grown into a complex range of professionalised arts practices, with their own traditions, trends and praxis, gurus and lobbyists, academic study and practical training. Sub-fields such as arts in health, art in prisons, arts in regeneration, youth arts, arts in education, have each grown their own professional associations, networks and academic courses and theses.

■ Historic roots

A very strong idea informed the beginnings of community arts: that of Cultural Democracy. This is founded on the idea that culture is an active phenomenon, subject to change – not a fixed canon that can be made accessible and paternalistically conveyed and distributed. It has been an interpretation of the 'Right to Art' as enshrined in the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights: ***"...the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts..."*** It has sought to promote the radical idea that each individual and each community deserves respect, a voice and access to the means of expression. It is based on the belief that each of us is creative and has the right to participate in decisions that affect the quality of our cultural lives, as an extension to the fundamental freedoms of political franchise.

This gives rise to another distinction or nuance of community arts, compared with traditional amateur arts – community arts aimed to create something original and new, involving some degrees of authorial control and input from the participants, rather than the production of an extant work.

The roots of what have in recent years been called “participatory arts” and are beginning to be referred to as “collaborative arts” are in the community arts movement of the 1970s. This sought to place the means of cultural expression in the hands of those who had least power and ownership over the tools and media of expression – to create alternative narratives and to celebrate popular and diverse cultures that were less visible through mainstream media and arts channels than they are today.

By the year 2000, several significant cultural policy landmarks had expanded and strengthened the participatory arts phenomenon in the UK:

- The establishment of the National Lottery increased the total sums available for the arts and brought a radical expansion of kinds of organisations seeking to organise, commission or take part in arts – including local authorities, community organisations, schools, housing associations and traditional amateur arts groups, such as brass bands and Little Theatres.
- There was also considerable delegation of decision-making to the regions and a requirement for consultation with local authorities, many of which had been strong champions of a more local and grass roots approach to cultural policy.
- In 1998 the Arts Council and its clients were required to report on how they contributed to the government’s targets for neighbourhood renewal. This increased the validity of community arts companies and projects as part of the overall range of arts receiving Arts Council support.
- Legislation such as the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act and recommendations from the 1999 Macpherson Report began a sustained period of trying to rectify the endemic barriers to participation in public and cultural life by ethnic and cultural minorities and people with disabilities. Again, the participatory arts sector had a part to play in this.
- Expansion of the participatory arts profession also saw an expansion in the Higher Education sector’s interest in training and research. Specialist degrees or modules in Community Dance, Community Music, Applied Theatre, sprang up as well as Masters and Doctorates.
- Alongside these political and cultural shifts is the blossoming of the digital era. Digital media have made new forms of creative expression possible and new tools of distribution and communication – a kind of unforeseen version and scale of the Cultural Democracy that participatory arts had sought at the outset.

In 2012 the Olympics and Paralympics Opening and Closing Ceremonies and many other aspects of the Cultural Olympiad demonstrated the strength and maturity of the UK traditions of collaborations between professionals and volunteer participants.

■ What are participatory arts with older people for?

Arts participation by young people has been the predominant focus of policy and practice for many years, and now (in part due to the somewhat belated realisation of the ageing society, and perhaps because the founders of the community arts movement face their own

“coming of age”) we are seeing a debate gathering as to whether there is a body of practice with enough commonality and specificity to represent a sector of “Arts and Older People”. Or a need for one.

Opportunities and resources for older people to work with professional artists have been predominantly focused on health and social care, with an expectation that artists should seek funding for this work from health resources and consequently measure its success through health outcomes. While many arts professionals recognise the health values of the arts, argue their value, raise the resources, and produce excellent work through those routes, most do not see health outcomes as the sole or even main justification for taking part in making art. **Arts for Health Cornwall and Isles of Scilly** is one such example. They strive for the intrinsic and distinctively artistic values and characteristics – the expression of identity, sensory experiences, opinions, talents, stories, imagined lives, transformed spaces and meanings. Indeed combinations of all these artistic possibilities. The danger of picking out specific outcomes such as preventing falls, combatting loneliness, improving memory, lifting depression, is that it can limit the imagination and expectations of all who take part.

As Kurban Haji, a member of **Entelechy Arts**, once said to me, when asked if being part of this theatre company was good for his health, *“I don’t know but I frequently cancel an appointment with my cardiologist in favour of a rehearsal.”*

Michael D Higgins, poet, septuagenarian and President of the Republic of Ireland, said at Bealtaine’s Creating A New Old Conference in 2012: *“policy makers find it difficult to believe that old people imagine.”*

■ What’s special about the arts?

There are many activities that enrich life and bring health, well-being and opportunities for active participation with them. Many interest groups are busy finding evidence and advocating for the social “impact” of their particular enthusiasm. Sport can argue its case in combatting obesity; gardening can alleviate depression; bread-making can reduce crime; stroking pets lowers blood pressure and can reduce the need for post-surgery painkillers by half; pub quizzes and crossword puzzle clubs may help stave off dementia. Many activities will be easier to organise and cheaper to provide than professionally led arts participation. Many will appeal to some people and not to others. So as I cite examples and consider the incredible diversity of activity which is called “arts”, I am always trying to understand the distinctively different qualities that they offer.

I know that making art is not magic but neither is it, for most people, routine. It is an act that is riven with uncertainty, contradictions and the unknown. It requires us to imagine, experiment, explore, and try things out. It can take us to new thoughts and unpredictable emotional responses or it can capture the ordinary and make it a bit extraordinary or beautiful. Its effect on others is unpredictable too. It mustn’t be predictable and it cannot be relied on. The same piece of music in the same concert hall will not be received in the same way by every audience member. These are its essential qualities which make those interested in reliable outcomes, rationally measuring and counting things, rightly nervous.

■ When is it art?

When does exploring ideas through role-play and acting-out, or playing with clay or paint or textiles become working more deeply in the art form and making a work of art or even a moment of artistic meaning? I look for a combination of form, content and context that can resonate meaning beyond the literal, enabling things to be seen afresh, to convey actual

and imagined experience through the senses and to arrest us with new ways of knowing and feeling. We may not always achieve this as solo or collaborative artists, but when we do, it can make a more indelible mark and release some deeper sense of shared insight than many other ways of expressing and explaining ourselves. For this reason I have, throughout this publication, included samples of words from poets, playwrights and wordsmiths, who can provide those metaphors that get to the heart of points I am trying to explore.

As a life-long lover of art, when that kind of meaning-making touches me, it enlivens me. To make those meanings for others seems a much braver and harder act but one that too many of us are denied the chance to try. Old age can bring that opportunity, as Loretto Fernie, a patient who took up painting as part of **Art in Hospital's** work in Scotland experienced:

"I would paint all day and all night if I could. I'd love to have gone to art school. I would never have missed a class. I'd have been the first one in and the last one out."

■ Who are "older people"?

Many of the principles and practices discussed in this are applicable to any participatory arts context, but I am aiming to focus on those which are particularly pertinent to the changes we experience as individuals and as a society as we approach living with old age.

Broadly I am echoing the scope of David Cutler's *Ageing Artfully* publication:

"Being an older person is a relative concept. It is rarely used officially to mean someone under fifty and usually refers to retirement age and above. The Baring Foundation's funding [has] largely [been] directed to organisations working with people over 60. Older people are, of course, a highly diverse group. The presence of ageism in society means that all older people are potentially the object of discrimination. However it is also the case that many older people enjoy fulfilled lives."

I am eligible for the many activities specifically advertised for "over 55s" – table tennis in Leicester, computer training in Hammersmith, discount train travel in Wales, drama in Aberdeen, dance in Stratford and Hull. So when I watched or joined in the projects featured here I was very aware that they could be for me and for all of us, now or soon or at some point. I agree with François Matarasso's speech at Bealtaine's Creating A New Old Conference, I think:

"Ageing concerns us all...this is an experience that we are all going to have. I struggle with the lack of imagination that we have in thinking that older people are somehow 'other', they're just us in 20 years' time."

Consider the word metaphor. Meta = beyond and phor = carry. Carrying meaning beyond the literal, the tangible, beyond the grossly semantic. To the self-contained 'ding an sich' of musical meaning. Metaphor is the generator, the powerplant of music, just as it is of poetry. Aristotle puts metaphor midway between the unintelligible and the commonplace. A marvellous remark. It is metaphor, he says, that most produces knowledge. The artist cannot help but agree, nor can the lover of art.

(Transcribed from a lecture Leonard Bernstein gave at Harvard in the seventies, in a series called *The Unanswered Question*. (YouTube)

■ Segregation or solidarity?

There are self-evident reasons not to segregate old from young, not to segregate people with dementia from those without it, not to categorise people by any limiting labels. Pragmatically speaking, though, limiting assumptions about older people do exist and can be challenged by acts of solidarity and self-determined expression. If there is choice involved, the camaraderie of being in a group of peers going through similar stages of life can be enjoyable, liberating and empowering. But being ghetto-ised and assumed to be the same, enjoy the same and want the same is as frightening and annoying in old age as it is at any other stage of life.

Life expectancy is increasing at the rate of over two years per decade, and the percentage of the population over 65 years is projected to double over the next forty years. No one can doubt that old age can present individuals, families and the public domain some distinct challenges as well as opportunities. Art can be a means of understanding and planning for personal as well as community changes.

Artistic expression can particularly explore and challenge stereotypes and assumptions, revealing the glorious complexities of getting through life. Older people's perspectives, as they create new works of art, bring a wealth of possibilities of subjects, forms and contexts that can enrich the cultural offer for very many people.

Section 1 *Products from processes*

How To Be An Artist

*Stay loose. Learn to watch snails.
Plant impossible gardens.
Celebrate every gorgeous moment.
Take moonbaths. Have wild imaginings.
Transformative dreams,
And perfect calm.
Draw on walls.
Read everyday.
Imagine yourself
Magic.*

(This extract from a poem by Sark, was put on the table in the art room by a palliative care nurse involved in Art in Hospital's art in palliative care programme)

Right from the earliest days of community arts this was the question – is the process more important than the product? In my early practice, as a co-founder of Jubilee Arts in the 1970s, the community arts movement hotly debated this. In the defining days of the movement, companies and individuals took up strong positions, proposed and adopted manifestos on this and other burning issues.

As a practitioner, I had no idea how to ask someone if they wanted to be in a process. I simply asked if they'd like to be part of creating a cabaret, or producing a local magazine, or making a children's book which told the story of their children's lives and experiences, or producing a fanzine or film or a play to be performed for the town about the town by the people of the town. Or I would be responding to specific requests: "we want to put on a community festival", "we want to make a film about the housing conditions on this estate," "we want to make a show about girls growing up". By 1989, a community play I co-directed (produced by Jubilee Arts and Theatre Foundry) was deemed by the Arts Council's Drama Officer to be more concerned with product than process and therefore counter to their (then) policy on what constituted community arts (and that definition would define which budget their support could come from). When the show was well reviewed in *The Guardian* and the Officer wanted a ticket, we offered him one to watch it from backstage "as he was more interested in process than product"!

Striving towards some sort of sharing and completion of a creation without doubt adds a dimension to the process but is not compulsory to be worthwhile as a creative act. If a work

is going to communicate and live beyond its maker, processes of selecting, editing, shaping, honing, experimenting and making decisions – including that of deciding not to exhibit it – kick in. I find it odd not to offer those kinds of processes as part of participation in arts. The artist's role in this is to support people while they explore what they currently don't know, or can't do, or haven't tested or might want to try. New questions begin to come into play – how does this affect people? How do I want to affect them? Do I like this? Is it anything yet? How does this work for this audience? What will it mean to them?

Of course no work of art exists outside a context and that context brings additional layers of meaning. Once art is beyond the boundaries of a personal activity, audiences bring their own meanings and readings to it. The space and time it occupies bring further contextual meanings. The act of curating alters the potential impact and depths of meaning – aesthetically and contextually.

The story behind the end product can also bring layers of meaningfulness to the work of art and that ownership of the process and the product is a powerful element. But if the end product provokes a predominantly charitable response in its audience, then I think we know that as art it falls short. If the process offered by artists provokes only a charitable response from its participants, I think we know it is a poor process.

■ Quality processes, quality products

Art in Hospital has a strong belief in the individual journey of the individual artists, the personal, sensory, and emotional experience of the act of creating as well as the power of bringing work to public exhibition.

"Some only realise their achievements once they see their work professionally framed..... it is essential that the art room be lined with works in progress" (from an account of Art in Hospital's two year art and creative writing project in palliative care in Scotland).

Of course the process comes first. The art room, the relationships with artists, the materials and resources present a number of different kinds of experience than are not usually available in long term hospital care.

Barbara McEwan Gulliver, Director and founder of Art in Hospital, is dedicated to ensuring that whatever process is offered, it is an artistic process, separate and alongside the medical disciplines of her clinical colleagues. The two parties have a high degree of mutual respect for each other's different and distinct professional knowledge. As Barbara says:

"it is about an emotional response to art, the feel of a brush on a piece of paper, the joy of colour, the texture of paint."

Visual arts demand that we are "in the moment". Engaged in making art we look intensely, concentrate on what is arising here and now literally or in our minds eye, absorbed in being and making while facing uncertainty. It is the business of an artist to be seeking the unknown outcomes of their absorption in the moment – what Keats called Negative Capability.

Kirsty Stansfield works in multi-media with Art in Hospital and finds that the person-centred approach echoes her own way of working as a professional artist:

"it is not about setting goals. It's on-going and has to be seen as long-term in the way we build relationships and trust. I think what we do is make space to allow people to find something within themselves."

Working in visual arts, one of Art in Hospital's golden rules is to provide the best possible materials as the sensory pleasures and possibilities of different media are key to both process and end products.

Artist, Marielle MacLeman:

"For us this is not a therapeutic practice. Our discussions with patients are about colour, light and materials."

Irene Florence tells of the reciprocal influence this has had on her work as an artist in her own studio:

"I am working with people who are very hesitant and unsure of the materials they are working with, whether it is charcoal, acrylics, pastels or oils. When I am in my own studio I try much harder now to let go with my materials and to enjoy them. I know I have become more confident in the use of texture, colour and surface."

For Art in Hospital, then, the process is paramount but it is above all else an artistic process, not one that is disguising or disguised as anything else. The artists' knowledge of artistic processes and their expertise are thoroughly understood and respected by the fellow clinical professionals amongst whom Art in Hospital's work takes place.

Dr Keith Beard FRCP Edin, Consultant Physician in Medicine for the Elderly, (retired) at Victoria Infirmary Glasgow is highly respectful of the skills of the Art in Hospital artists:

"They were open, non-prejudiced, non-judgemental and weren't setting any goals... There was a simple acceptance of everyone's ability and the artists were sharing these values with my patients... without goals or deadlines, patients can surprise us all."

Oxford Concert Party shares that belief in the need for the very highest quality of musical resources. As expert musicians they offer participants a structured workshop to hear, handle and play instruments that are beautifully constructed to make evocative sound. A group of frail elderly people and their carers at a day centre in Oxfordshire are initially hesitant about participating. Disclaimers abound:

"I am not a musician", "I was made to sit and mime at the back of the school choir", "he used to play the piano but his arthritis is bad now", "My hearing has gone."

But Tibetan Singing Bowls, the strange humming harmonics of the Didgeridoo, the Chilean Rainstick, the Vietnamese Hen and the Swedish Pentatonic Lyre produce audio sensations that amaze and intrigue everyone. Those with hearing impairments are experiencing the unusual resonances, vibrations and rhythms. Their carers think again about the nature of hearing loss. Frail hands explore the instruments' carvings and shapes and even the most diffident in the group connect in some personal way to these instruments. Arne Richards, founder of Oxford Concert Party, finds that men are sometimes particularly reluctant to be playful in activities in which they are not expert. He has found that their curiosity can be ignited by exploring how such instruments are made, or which part of the world they hail from, or the stories of how they are used in their native lands. Stories, memories, life stories become part of a rich experience of participation and sharing in these sessions.

■ Defining quality

Too often the idea that process is more important than product leads to a dismissal of the importance of high quality artistic skills and resources. I have encountered the argument from artists as well as care staff that quality and high expectations might inhibit or disempower participants from taking part. **Collective Encounters** have a very clear commitment to quality and agreed to share here their framework that sets out what quality in process and product is for them:

PROCESS

- Inclusive:** participants are treated equally and fairly; their contributions are valued and their differences respected;
- Creative:** the process involves artistic and creative development for all involved; it is enriching; it increases understanding and appreciation of theatre and arts;
- Empowering:** participants are supported to make sense of their place in the world, to think differently, to break down barriers;
- Responsive:** to the needs of individuals and the group; as far as is possible the process and subject matters are guided by the participants and there is a strong sense of ownership;
- Developmental:** the process offers opportunities for progression, the chance to develop new skills.

PRODUCT

- Exciting:** inventive, ambitious and communicating ideas;
- Provocative:** stimulating an audience to think in new ways, to ask questions they might otherwise not have asked, offering new insights into old problems and challenging the status quo;
- Technically accomplished:** demonstrating an appropriate level of technical expertise, production values and delivery;
- Important:** helping us make sense of our place in the world, lifting audiences above the day to day; offering something beyond simple entertainment; holding the possibility of change.

Participation in Collective Encounters' work can be in any part of the process and at any level of engagement. While the main focus will be about finding authentic experiences, and revealing hidden and less powerful voices through theatre production, there are many ways in which people participate – as performers, researchers, technicians and back stage or front of house crew, contributing to the thinking about what matters and how to make it happen. As one participant put it:

“she’s pulling out of us what we didn’t know we had in us”

■ Trust and listening

Aune Head Arts work across Devon with older people in all kinds of rural places. Many of them experience isolation and incipient mental health problems of old age. Their artists strive to create a tone and atmosphere for engendering trust. Jennie Hayes, Creative Producer told me that they work:

“as artists working slowly and gently with a particular community – finding ways in, using our creativity-led and people-centred expertise to draw in a group of participants. Most importantly, we allow the project goals to shift in response to those who become involved – we may end up (or if truth be told, often end up) in a very different place from our starting point.”

People share their experience and stories with Aune Head artists in the trust that the material will be respected and made into a worthwhile and high quality end product. The quality of relationships is engendered, above all, by high quality listening and sticking to the principles of respect and reciprocity. This respect means being completely clear about being artists – respecting each person’s unique talents and specialisms. Participants are experts in their own lives, artists are specialists in shaping meaning – they aim for a reciprocal collaboration. The creation of high quality arts products is not for the glorification of the artist, but to honour and respect the experiences of the participants and to make meaningful products for audiences.

■ Discretion and display

Sometimes showing works in public or beyond the participants themselves is inappropriate and the experience of taking part is much more important.

Akademi have been working in dance with women elders from the Bangladeshi community in London. They have lived through times and within a culture and religious rules that proscribes performance. It is hard to imagine that any shared or public performance would ever be appropriate for this generation in this community.

Most participants join this group because a health professional has advised it, to alleviate cardio vascular issues, arthritis or other conditions. The decision-makers in the household have agreed to it on this basis. The classes are held in a male-led community building, in the upstairs hall, which is segregated from the men for the duration of the class by a curtain.

Many older women from this community are carers of infants – grandchildren or great grandchildren. At home they may still be responsible for household work such as cooking and cleaning and child-rearing for large families. Their social participation is almost entirely restricted to their own gender and culture. Many do not speak English, even though they may have arrived here many decades ago. The very act of coming to this class is crossing



*Norman Pink listens to sound work for EVA Radio.
Photographer: Jennie Hayes/Aune Head Arts.*

borders of participation that they will have seldom transgressed – moving in ways that their bodies have never been required to move, sharing an activity with non-muslim women, and hearing music that is perhaps taboo and certainly not part of their everyday experience.

Dance artist Amina Khayyam puts the women through a regime of dance moves from the Kathak dance vocabulary, calling out instructions in Bengali and demonstrating from out front, with assistants instructing, encouraging and physically moving people into the required positions. This approach is far from the traditions of a collaborative, devised, person-centred tradition of community arts, but it is familiar to the women and provides a reassuring framework for their participation. As the class moves from systematic movements in lines, to a freer improvised response to music, Amina encourages movements and gestures that have associations with emotions and moods in response to the music. This is a moment of physical and emotional liberation and individualism that is a rare experience for these women. Head scarves and hijabs slip, laughter and exhilaration break out.

Here participation in dance without any performance or presentation is quite properly the sole purpose, attuned to the context and the cultural norms of the group. This is a hidden generation, who came to Britain from rural Bangladesh as teenagers in the 1950s – many of them married and raising children from as young as 12 – 17, without any schooling then or since. Their access to “art” is likely to have been restricted to watching films of that era. Music is taboo. The idea of wider public display is out of the question.

*Akademi Inter-Action Programme 2010.
Photographer: R J Fernandez.*



Public display in this instance is dancing with and in front of each other. Even being together in a group is a new phenomenon for many and a step that relies on long term trust and sensitivity throughout the process. How does anyone know if this is a good thing? The main signs are persistent attendance, (which has exceeded the results of previous physio-therapy services) and smiles. Some participants have talked about the experience in terms of “moner kushi” or internal happiness and other participants’ testimonies illustrate the qualities of participation that arts engagement offers:

“The difference between exercise and dance is, exercise is exercise, you do and you feel better physically, but dance makes me feel better from head to toe. I have lots of fun doing it and it helps clear my head and makes me happy from inside”

“I loved the dhamalia¹ with my friends it reminds me of all the happy moments I had in Bangladesh”

“I want to do more dance, can I come to your dance class”

■ The process of striving for a public performance

East London Dance established **Generation XYZ**, a dance company for older Londoners, committed to the creation of original dance for performance. Their work will reach not only their families and friends but also other groups of older people and onto wider platforms including major events such as *Big Dance* and **Capital Age Festival**. They aim for a quality of work that will stand the test of mainstream artwork – to be interesting to people who have no connection to it personally.

I visit them in the early stages of creating a dance performance entitled *Superhuman*. Participants are aged from 60 to 85+. Some are returning to dance after many years, some are continuing their life-long love of dance, but exploring new forms and genres, and some are coming to it afresh, as something they’ve always wanted to do and now have the time. (I haven’t taken part in a dance workshop for at least 30 years and by joining in their warm up, expertly led by Cheryl McChesney, I begin to observe the experience through my own body.

The openness of the group and the prevailing culture of acceptance and enjoyment are liberating. I witness the stamina, creativity and commitment of the participants, and I experience being supported (physically and socially) by people who are well into their third age. The warm up enables all abilities and body shapes to participate to their maximum capacity and invites individual and group expressivity.

Warmed up, they go through a rigorous rehearsal and feedback process. At pains to avoid any “charitable response” and offering the participants the respect of high ambition and expectation, dance leader, Cheryl has invited a panel of dancers and producers from the East London Dance staff to watch a run-through and critique the work in progress. The company won’t expose anyone to a public platform unless the work goes beyond the enjoyment of the participants. There are discussions about what will improve the experience for the audience, how to explore further dance language and ensure the quality can convey the content with authenticity and accomplishment.

¹ a social dance based around the Dhamalia river and the river workers in Bangladesh: including the river boatmen and the women who come to the river to wash their produce and saris.

The participants are under pressure. Remembering dance movements and sequences from week to week is particularly demanding for some, but the ambition of the endeavour is clearly as stimulating and enlivening as it is demanding and challenging. This is undoubtedly another form of process to be experienced and one which is often denied older people – the process of learning, of creating something for others, of laying down new memories, of being challenged physically and mentally – of being stretched!

This emphasis on working towards an end-product is not compulsory for all older people at East London Dance. Generation XYZ has emerged from the on-going weekly open access workshops, run under the title *Leap of Faith*. These sessions offer an exploration of the joys and challenges of dancing without always seeking to make it a performance. The expertise of dance professionals with knowledge of how to work with older bodies and artistically validate their expressiveness is essential to this process.

■ On adult terms

The idea of a process detached from any outcome can feel rather arbitrary to many adults who are not confident in the ways of art. Very young children have a capacity to explore and play with materials without a care about an end result. They are enviable for being “in the moment” – experiencing the sensory delights of paint squishing, colouring an entire sheet of paper red or happily travelling the route from separate and distinct colours to a big muddy puddle. These adventures in pure process seldom hold fear or embarrassment for a two or three year old and fully absorb them until something more absorbing comes along.

*Every child is an artist.
The problem is how to remain an
artist once he grows up.*

Pablo Picasso

As children age, anxieties begin to arise about whether they can make something viable or recognisable. A process of conforming to adult expectations, being more self-aware, making sense of the world leads to a new stage of life and new creative processes. When children begin to want to make something, their ambitions are often limitless. I remember overhearing my own son Harry and his friend Peter (both aged four or five) playing with some big empty cardboard boxes in the garden. Were they cars,

were they dens, were they drums? Then I heard Peter say: “ask your mum for some sellotape, we’re going to make this thing fly!”

It presumes too much to expect adults to return readily to that pre-school state of playfulness. Activities that are reminiscent of playschool – sing alongs, waving parachutes, visiting clowns, making pictures out of pasta are not associated with a sense of agency in the world. For adults fearing the loss of their dignity, uncertain with strangers, lacking a sense of autonomy, child-like activities can feel very uncomfortable, patronising and plain weird. They can be awkward and uncomfortable reminders of our diminished status and threatened dignity.

Artists tend to know that the playful and exploratory stages of creativity are vital to exercising the creative muscles of the body, the mind and the imagination.

Depending on the framing of the opportunity, self-consciousness can be dispelled or strengthened and group trust built or shattered through play, so all these kinds of activities are best framed within a genuinely adult purpose – to make art, to trust in an artist, to become an artist. The stages involved in making art in an adult world are: Research and Development, and Production and Distribution. These are the processes that we might be concerned with, not an abstract idea of process divorced from product.

The first two stages (not necessarily accomplished in sequence) are the most important for artists. These exploratory stages can involve anxiety as well as revelation. They can be enjoyable and it can be demanding. If the aim is to create anything original and explore anything authentic it will certainly involve uncertainty. Without due time being allocated to the research and development stages (process), the end product if achieved at all, is likely to be forced out of participants and then forced onto people to admire.

This is not an argument for avoiding end-products or for leaping towards them at all costs – it is an argument for respecting adulthood, being up front and honest about unapologetically offering an artistic process on adult terms – whether or not it results in a product for distribution and display. If it does result in the final stages, the platforms and media should be fit for purpose and the authors should have a say in whether or not they are displayed.

In both the early years of life and the extremities of dementia, being present in the moment is our paramount state of being. In the years between those two stages of life we can learn a lot from the in-the-moment absorption of the very young and those with dementia or approaching the end of life. Arts processes can enable us to enjoy that freedom again and be led by the very young and the very old.

Section 2 *Once and future life stories*

*I think I'm goin' back
To the things
I learned so well
In my youth*

(lyrics from *Goin' Back* by Gerry Goffin and Carole King, most famously recorded by Dusty Springfield)

British socialist folk singer, Roy Bailey memorably once said, of the tendency of folk music towards nostalgia, "it's good to look back but it's rude to stare". Recalling the past, remembering personal experiences of historic events from unique points of view, testimonies of the day to day details of life in past times – these will more than likely be part of the mix of arts practice by and with older people. There is frequent debate and positioning amongst participants and artists about the extent to which acts of reminiscence are the means, the end, or to be avoided.

■ **The roots of reminiscence based arts practice**

The pioneering and influential work of Pam Schweitzer MBE, who established **Age Exchange** in 1983, created a strong link between participatory theatre and older people through reminiscence approaches. Schweitzer developed methods of gathering verbatim memories as the basis for theatre productions. She was not the first to be interested in verbatim theatre, but her emphasis on the qualities and social outcomes of work with elders was a distinctive one and different from the focus of the documentary theatre movement of the sixties and seventies, notably championed by Peter Weiss, Joan Littlewood and Peter Cheeseman, who also used verbatim sources for their works.

Pam set up the first Reminiscence Centre in London in 1987, and founded the International Reminiscence Network in 1993. Many community theatre and arts practitioners (me included) learnt through her training courses and shared her belief in the importance of authentic stories of "ordinary lives" being told in person, and her commitment to giving voice to the stories of the diverse immigrants to Britain. She and many others have established a strong and dynamic body of practice, not just in theatre, demonstrating the power of reminiscence as a source for:

- making original art which speaks of and involves older generations;
- revealing stories which can bridge understandings between cultures and bring understanding of the journeys of immigrants that might otherwise be unchronicled or misrepresented;

- sharing knowledge and experiences across generations and connecting the value of memory to the wider public domain by capturing historic events for the public record and archives;
- providing a process which can enable people to relive and reshape their own narrative, perhaps with personal therapeutic outcomes;
- providing meaningful and enriching experiences for people living with dementia and their carers.

Outside of Shaw's epithetical wit, the word "reminiscence" implies a pleasurable activity. Within clinical and social care there has been wide interest in the application of reminiscence processes for health and wellbeing. Indeed research has found connections between reminiscence and the alleviation of depression in old age and many of us will have experienced, at any age, the pleasure that recollection of happy past experiences can bring. Too often it is seen as an end in itself though and too rarely is it an act that involves any genuine reciprocity. It has become another form of care, whereby any activity that provokes any memory is leapt upon as a sign of "success".

In the act of making a meaningful work of art to share with others, the act of reminiscence can go beyond an escape to the past and become a route to a connection with the present.

■ A community working together to remember itself

London Bubble Theatre drew on first hand memories for their year-long project – *Grandchildren of the Blitz*.

30 young people from South London interviewed 20 elders, who had been children themselves during the London Blitz. Interviews and drama improvisations led to the theatre production, *Blackbirds*, performed by a cast of 40, ranging from 7-78 years, to an audience of over 750 people and to highly positive feedback and acclaim from participants and audiences.

Reminiscences make one feel so deliciously aged and sad.

George Bernard Shaw,
The Irrational Knot

The older residents were needed – as experts. They were needed by theatre experts, historians, educationalists and archivists. Their memories were vital in a genuinely collaborative project, as they alone could reveal the factual and emotional details about living in the extraordinary times of the London Blitz. Not for the sake of nostalgia for its own sake, not for therapeutic purposes per se – but for the sake of the development of a work of art, whose process and end product could foster a sense of community in the Bermondseys, Rotherhithes and Deptfords of today.

These elders' memories were honoured through this creative and artistic project in very many ways:

- by the publication of the play for further performance by schools or other theatre groups;
- through a process of interviews that paid genuine attention to their rich knowledge and unique identity;
- by the publication of the audio interviews and stories on a dedicated website as record for future reference;

- by enriching the younger generation's awareness of the history of the streets where they are growing up;
- by the creation of a theatre production performed to the wider community.



Children play the children that the elders were during the Blitz in London Bubble's show, 'Blackbirds'.

■ Recollecting the past to inform the future

Acta Community Theatre Company worked with the **Malcolm X Drama Group** gathering their early memories of life in Jamaica, their decisions to come to England in the 1960s and 1970s and their experiences of settling in Bristol. Through improvised drama, their memories are brought to life and re-enacted for an audience of school pupils at the City Academy in St. George, on the edge of Bristol's inner city. In the audience are children from many different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Some will, themselves, have recently arrived in the UK; many will be descended from immigrants whose journeys will have been similar to those being depicted by the Malcolm X Drama Group; some will have little or no knowledge about the personal experiences behind migration to Bristol from the Caribbean in this era, and many will have quite limited encounters with their great grandparents' generation (although one of the school children is actually a great grandchild of one of the performers).

The enjoyment of the school children in seeing people of their grandparents' and great grandparents' age performing their youthful selves is quite evident. While some scenes drew on difficult and painful experiences – separation, loss, hostility and cruelty through racism and ignorance, struggling with unexpected material hardship – there was much pleasure and pride communicated by the actors as they celebrated the achievements of their long lives since making that journey from their homeland.

But the most evident pleasure and commitment comes from this group's desire to share this with the young audience, many of whom have experienced first-hand or whose parents experienced the continuing challenges of migration to the UK in recent years and who-knows-what hardships beforehand. They urge a sense of optimism and determination on the youngsters with a hearty rendition of *You Can Get It If You Really Want* by fellow Jamaican émigré and reggae star Jimmy Cliff.

The method preferred by Acta and the Malcolm X Drama Group is to stick to improvisation right through to performance. While the memories of the past are the focus for the piece, remembering scripted text and cues in a conventional theatre process can hinder the expression of a live re-enactment. The audience respond to this improvised approach with respect and enjoyment – seeing not actors and characters but a certain natural vulnerability that they identify with.

*My eyes are dim with childish tears
My heart is idly stirred
For the same sound is in my ears
Which in those days I heard.
Thus fares it still in our decay
And yet the wiser mind
Mourns less for what Age takes away;
Than what it leaves behind.*

Extract from *The Fountain* by William Wordsworth – a poem in the form of a conversation between an old man and a younger one.

In this example we see the many values of a reminiscence-based approach to arts participation:

- a group handling, shaping and offering up material of which they are the experts;
- the validation of the narrative, culture and heritage of a community that has a special place in Bristol's story;
- a means of older people re-living their youthful selves and celebrating the struggle and triumphs that enrich their wisdom and identity today;
- finding common experiences from the past which strengthen old and build new friendships;
- being part of the wider civic mix beyond retirement – in a school, with a new generation, contributing to preparing the next generation to take their places in Bristol's future and history.



Lin Douglas and Barbara Dettering in 'We Have Overcome'. Photographer: Mark Simmons.

*The weight of this sad time we
must obey,
Speak what we feel, not what we ought
to say.
The oldest have borne most; we that
are young
Shall never see so much, nor live
so long.*

William Shakespeare, *King Lear*

■ The oldest have borne most

Re-Live is based in Cardiff and works with people to mine first-hand accounts of the past and create theatre from these authentic life stories to be performed by the participants – as personal testimony shaped into compelling theatre. Terri Morrow, Jeff Diamond and Marianne Harman spent several months in 2011 working with Karin Diamond and Alison O'Connor, the co-artistic directors of Re-Live, on an in depth process of reflection and life-review. The resulting show which toured Wales and was performed at Ireland's Bealtaine Festival was *A Story to Call my Own*. Participant Terri Morrow said:

"For me the whole project was at times scary but filled with awe and wonder. To be able to release pent up emotions and be given the chance to show exactly how I had felt about certain episodes in my life was both cathartic and empowering. The night of the performance was something I will never forget, the feeling of camaraderie between the group, the warmth of the audience, the pride on my son's face. Pure magic!"

Terri performs her own story in the show. It involves memories of a violent father. Terri's fellow performer, Eirlys, tells of the still-birth of her baby and the story of the years spent without proper acknowledgment of that loss and her search and campaign to track

down a common grave for a generation of hers and others' nameless still-born infants. She cradles her own cardigan and sings a lullaby in her native Welsh language. A haunting soprano voice. This is powerful and affecting art.

Re-Live theatre makers' work acknowledges that remembering the past is not necessarily a way to find refuge from the present day and not an automatic route to halcyon days. They, along with many other artists and care professionals distance themselves from the word reminiscence. They seek to deepen the process of exploring life stories to listen out for the important stories and insights that make old age a source of wisdom, not a cause for charity.

It is hard to imagine any long life that does not experience, at some point, loss, grief, fear, and all the human emotions that life brings with it. Many older people today are facing a culture that wears its heart on its sleeve, while remembering times when many harsh experiences were dealt with very differently, kept hidden and remained taboo. Many are facing multiple bereavements from the past and now at the end of their lives.

Karin and Alison are skilled in reaching for a deeper level of engagement in the process for both participants and for audiences. As makers of art they collaborate with the participants to seek out wisdom from life stories and to examine the human resilience that makes old age a vital resource for an understanding of how we shape the present and the future. By doing so they enable their participants to become artists too.

Even when memories are pleasurable ones, they can provoke a sense of mourning. A project conducted in a hospice, enabled the patients to set down their memories for their successors before their imminent death. Annette Pearce, Social Worker with Marie Curie Cancer Care, was, in her own words:

“blown away by the quality of the piece of work [] and so pleased by the obvious benefit that such an achievement had given to our patients. It must be said that they were able to have a unique experience toward the end of their lives.”

Bereaved relatives of those who took part in the hospice project have paid testimony to the on-going importance of the project for them.

■ Informed Consent

To achieve engagement in art that can handle difficult maybe painful material to those involved – participants, artists and audiences – requires careful and responsible processes and protocols to build a trusting partnership.

The key to handling deeper acts of remembrance and the whole life story approach is consent. Re-Live and other artists whose work seeks to go beyond reminiscence for its own sake, employ techniques for knowing how far the participants want to go and how any group is equipped to handle sensitive revelations and feelings.

Alison and Karin use an Informed Consent Interview to reassure people that they are letting themselves in for something safe. This interview is vital as people who are vulnerable and may be experiencing low self-esteem, can be concerned that, in a group, they will lose their fragile individuality and that it will be submerged into the group, causing a frightening loss of self. The Informed Consent Interview puts great emphasis on them choosing to join the group, or not. Karin Diamond explains:

“The interview is held between individual members and the group leaders (or only one if two would be intimidating). It explains fully the purpose of the group, answers any questions, and asks if the person wants to take part. It is important that the participant is encouraged to go away and think whether they want to join and to let you or better still another member of staff know later.”

Renewal of this consent is sought on a rolling basis as issues come to be explored. This was particularly important in the Re-Live’s theatre project involving people with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (more on this in Section Four).

■ Reciprocity

In each of the above examples the experience of making a show was important to the participants but equally powerful for those that came to see the resulting production. This is the additional dimension that making art for sharing with others brings – a sense of purpose and connection – a place in the picture of a whole community – reciprocity.

Karin Diamond, travelled to Japan on a Churchill Travel Fellowship. She worked with Dr Yukimi Uchide, General Director of the Social Welfare Foundation Tenjin-kai in Ofunato. She described the three phases of Japan’s response to their ageing society. To begin with people with dementia had been locked away; in the “era of cure” they were put in care homes and given medication; then came the “era of care”, when a massive programme of arts was ploughed into care homes, and elderly residents were plied with a schedule of activities with the best of intentions but without necessarily any reciprocal purpose; now Japan is in the “era of reciprocity” where older people have “treasured partners” and activities are collaborative and based on consent and a strong respect for identity and continued respect for adulthood.

■ Memory and the senses

For some people, as they experience more recent memories as unreliable – reaching for memories laid down much longer ago can be a vital part of feeling well and whole. I cannot claim to understand the physiology of memory, how it works, how it falters, how the mechanism of acquiring new memories weakens, but the pleasures of hearing familiar music, singing along with familiar lyrics, reciting poetry learnt by heart, seem to be self – evident parts of ageing.

*This song of mine will wind its music
around you, my child, like the fond arms
of love.*

*This song of mine will touch your
forehead like a kiss of blessing.*

Rabindranath Tagore, *My Song*

The Sage Gateshead’s Learning and Participation Department involves participants experiencing the onset of memory loss and dementia in group singing. They have developed a song book with a repertoire of popular and familiar songs – many of them familiar from decades past. For some this might seem like the clichéd infantile activities that we fear old age will reduce us to. But one of the men in the project described the pleasure of remembering and singing songs he’d learnt “at his mother’s knee” as “like drinking a delicious cordial”. For this participant it conjured up a sense of safety

in infancy and alleviated the anxiety that he feels about current memory failings. Songs and music have a potency that associates with different milestones of age – adolescence and falling in love, times of celebration, holidays and travels, the mood of a summer, times of hardship or war – all these can be associated in our minds with a particular song or piece of music.

Oxford Concert Party set up a Desert Island Discs format at day centres in Oxfordshire, to delve into the music that members of the groups loved and the stories behind that affection. Through songs and recorded and live music, the diversity of experience and identity within the day centre attenders were made manifest.

Songs are a relatively well known touchstone of our identity, associated with key eras we have lived through, denoting a connection to a time, a place, a group of people, a part of our identity. Other media and art forms are less often turned to but equally able to stimulate the sensory memories.

B-arts' project *Soundworks* found that all the senses were important in the care home setting they worked in, in Stoke-on-Trent. Textiles were particularly potent. Photographs printed or viewed in the high resolution of an i-pad, were rare and attractive in an unchanging visual environment of a care home. And sound itself proved a very accessible route to reviewing past times, knowledge, and interests that can still be pursued. The sound of the pot bank evoked the hidden skills of the residents who had populated the Staffordshire Potteries as Bottom Knockers, Dipper Glazers, Crank Makers, Fettlers, Fritters and Jigger Turners! Exploring sensory experiences brought the past and the present into the life of the care home for the shared enjoyment of residents, staff and artists.

The ear tends to be lazy, craves the familiar and is shocked by the unexpected; the eye, on the other hand, tends to be impatient, craves the novel and is bored by repetition.

WH Auden quoted by R. Victoria Arana in *WH Auden's Poetry: Mythos, Theory and Practice*

B-arts began to explore what they and Dr Mo Ray of Keele University Department of Gerontology, with whom they work, described as "Memory box mania". They saw the limitations of this almost ubiquitous phenomenon, which sees the gathering of random facts about a resident as a reference point for their care plan.

They summarise these limitations as:

- Often put together by care staff/relatives once the person has been moved into residential care setting (no on-going stimulation for what goes into them/ownership for the individual);
- As physical objects there tends to be a bias towards visual (not much scope for sound/video or the inclusion of images of quality that can be sensorily stimulating in their own right);
- They are by definition about the past – limiting someone's biography to a few key facts from the past; they fix and restrict the identity leaving little room to encourage or expect new interests;
- For some residents it is very hard to find out any information (they have no close relatives)/the photographs/objects etc. are not necessarily contextualised (outside of people's consciousness, including staff/relatives);
- Each box/cabinet is usually kept very focussed on the individual (it is not usually explored as something which can stimulate collective experience).

■ Life goes on

B-arts artists Ben McManus and Anne Kinnaird began to digitise some of the boxes' content and explored the impact not just on the residents but on their relatives too. Tablet pcs enabled many of the frailest residents to manipulate digital media, capture images, sound, footage and online resources. They were able to find ways of tapping into residents' interests and especially avoiding the frequent barriers experienced to men participating.

This approach has enabled the on-going lives of residents to connect to relatives and for new experiences to be added to the personal e-archives. Recording activities and playing



Joan responds to a digitised picture of her husband as a young man. Photographer: Anne Kinnaird.

them back immediately on the TV in the lounge also demonstrably added enjoyment to the processes, and provided an event which could be shared again with relatives and visitors. This kind of repetition and reinforcement of new experiences seems to help to gather reassuring new memories and reference points from the current situation.

Joan is a resident at the home where B-arts are working. Her husband comes to visit her daily but she has not recognised or inter-acted with him for a very long time. He brought in a photo of himself as a young man to be scanned and added to Joan's digital bank – a starting point for some further work with residents. The photo is precious to him so he had not wanted it to be physically added to Joan's memory box, but when he saw artists Ben and Anne digitising content he asked if he could bring it in as he knew it had always been her favourite photo of him.

Anne documents the workshops and captures this moment as Ben and Joan are going through her digital bank – a slide show with sound clips. Joan had not reacted at all until this picture came up, then she leant forward and touched the screen. Later this event was shared with Joan's husband. He found this photographic record of her reaction very powerful, and said it had given him the heart to keep visiting every day. The staff found it very motivating too, realising how useful and relatively easy it can be to take, source and use photography as part of what happens regularly in the home.

B-arts are currently in an R&D stage of looking for ways in which these digital and multi-sensory approaches can be further developed to maintain links between the past and the present experience for people in residential care and connect them to their families and communities. Several other partners are interested including the Stoke City Library Service, Staffordshire Carers networks and Higher Education care training providers.

■ Connecting to care plans

Life story work is increasingly widely recommended by the care profession as a tool to improve care and arts organisations have had some success in providing training in that work. Common experience would suggest that recognising and understanding the older persons' past life will enhance a carer's respect and empathy for those in their care.

Perhaps my best years are gone... But I wouldn't want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn't want them back.

Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*

The South West Yorkshire NHS Partnership developed an award winning toolkit for the development of multi-media approaches to continuing life story work in residential care – the Portrait of a Life (POAL) Toolkit. Care professionals that implemented POAL work over a sustained period reported a demonstrable “shift in culture of care and positive outcomes for residents”. These included fewer hospital admissions and improvements to family relationships. For care home staff it resulted in significantly reduced time off work through sickness, a complete cessation of the need for agency staff, increased enjoyment and fulfilment in their work.

As age increases a pool of memories may become deeper and fuller than the store of plans that lie ahead. In some cases this pool may itself be drying up. This stock of images and physical memories will include fond memories as well as loss and sadness. The act of reminiscence in itself can be pleasurable or painful. Being asked to reminisce for my own good feels patronising and if my failing memory is worrying me it would feel like an unwelcome pressure I'd want to avoid. If memory is the capacity that is failing it seems

peculiar to place so much emphasis on it. If I were paraplegic I would not expect to be valued and applauded only in so far as I tried or succeeded to walk.

When memories are part of a genuine reciprocal exchange they can be of value to all involved. Making art can provide that authentic reason for exchange and a genuine end point for sharing. Memories can be interesting for those who didn't witness them but they can also be the reason why the young yawn at the old.

Reminiscence does not need to be the starting point or the destination for arts participation. It is a source of and subject for art like any other that can be explored or avoided. Where memory is failing, concentration on it seems to confirm its loss but fail to acknowledge the possibility of life lived in the moment and in the senses.

Section 3 *Influencing the public realm*

■ Personal and public purpose

Retirement, bereavement, isolation can all be overwhelming factors of old age, diminishing confidence, hope and spark for life. For many, participation in a purposeful creative project offers a chance to be sociable and purposeful in a public arena of ideas and opinions, and to influence their community's direction.

Govan is an area of Greater Glasgow formerly dominated by the shipyards and today one of the most deprived areas of Scotland. There, 11 years ago, **Plantation Productions** was founded by Moya Crowley, following an extensive career in mainstream media production and broadcasting. With a consortium of partners they established The Portal as a new arts facility on historic Govan High Street, housing equipment and spaces for creative community arts and media production.

I visited the weekly session of the Plantation Productions Seniors Group (now known as STAMP – Seniors Thursday Arts and Media Project). STAMP participants share a history of working lives as part of the extraordinary community of shipyard workers, with its aspects of tough manual labour, industrial disputes and political ideals. They have produced several documentaries, destined for public showcases including the Glasgow Film Theatre, several film festivals and the World Conference on Active Ageing in Glasgow in 2012.

In collaborating in media projects with Plantation, their starting point was the disappearance of their industry and the threats to landmark buildings and community infrastructures that went with it. But older participants have led the group's plan to "make new history" rather than simply chronicle the past and reminisce about it. Jack Sweeney admits to me that after his retirement from work, his life and confidence shrank. His attendance at the STAMP project renewed his sense of purpose and participation in all that he has always believed in – making Govan a fit place to live and work. He values the social side of it but insists:

"I didna come here for tea and biscuits."

Down the ages, what art has always been good at is the ability to help people shape their world view, and on occasion to change that world view and to adjust their values in the light of their experience and I think to offer that opportunity to an ageing population is a great incentive to re-look at how our society is structured; we're not parking people at the end of life, we're giving them an opportunity to voice how we can all live a better and fuller life.

Mike White, Senior Research Fellow, University of Durham and a speaker at the Bealtaine's Creating A New Old Conference in Dublin 2012



Members of STAMP: Robert Docherty on boom, Roland Marshal playing Mammy's Boy, Jean Muir playing the Mammy, Jack Sweeny Camera Assistant and Jimmy McGhee the Suffering Da.shooting 'Get 'Em Aff'.

The best thing for being sad, replied Merlin, beginning to puff and blow, is to learn something. That's the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then — to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the only thing for you. Look what a lot of things there are to learn.

T.H. White, *The Once and Future King*

Jack is not alone in valuing this sense of public and communal purpose to contribute to the regeneration of Govan. They have embraced opportunities to learn new skills in media production because they ardently believe that what they have to say is vital to the future of Govan. The group recruits new members on the invitation in their website: "for people who want to remain creative and involved with their community."

STAMP's latest project took the form of a sharp and original comedy sketch programme, which explored with joyous self-mockery the challenges of old age. Their satirical games show – *Get 'Em Aff* – sees elderly contestants face a conveyer belt of supermarket food items and try to remove the wrappings against the clock! Other sketches surprise and delight with their unique insights into old age.

Just a few samples of the participants' testimonies illustrate the importance of this group to a sense of connection to each other and to the wider community:

"We're an active group out and about with cameras and doing research in relation to whatever project we're working on"

"Plantation Productions have helped to save parts of Govan!"

"We should make more films and show them to other groups, even in Paisley!"

Participants are making proposals for future projects. Helen is keen to film the launch of a ship at Fairfield's Shipyards, and events at The Commonwealth Games or the opening of the Riverside Museum. She introduced a rather shy friend to the group and was delighted to see her soon joining in with the lively debates and opinions always forming part of the banter of the group:

"Martha, something wonderful happened today... you found your voice!"

■ Public wisdom

In 2011 **Cubitt Gallery and Studios** offered members of the **Cubitt Seniors Art School** the chance to explore the built environment, art and design in public spaces. Their weekly art classes provide a simple and affordable offer to opt into learning and tap into the artistic knowledge and expertise of professional artists and curators. Participants vary in age from 55 to late 80s and are in a position to make autonomous choices. At a session I attended, I met Lene who trained in fine art in her youth and others who are exploring art as beginners because they now have time after retirement or other life changes.

Exploring the process of making art is always Cubitt's starting point. The theme of *The Public Realm* began as a rather abstract concept but through practice people explored it by drawing spaces they knew – specific parts of the insides of their homes, then the fronts of their homes and their streets. From these personal starting points it was time to go out and look at outside spaces the group knew and really look at them with the tools of artists. By that acute observation that drawing requires, the individuals in the group are seeing afresh, re-framing the familiar and making it "other." An accompanying class offered talks on art history and the role of contemporary art and artists in public spaces. They explored the Fluxus movement of the 1960s and tried out some of the methods of artists experimenting with blurring the boundaries between the artistic community and the surrounding society.

Step three invited the members to re-imagine the space of Islington Green – a space whose use and facilities have been long contested leaving a space without a clear function and struggling for any clear community ownership pride. The Cubitt group embarked on re-imagining the space, making drawings and models for an exhibition at Islington Town Hall entitled *Public Wisdom*.

The work began striking new chords in the local Planning Department and impressing several senior officers and councillors. The methods and the approaches of the **Public Wisdom Group** (as it is now known) working with Cubitt were of a different order from the results that local planning officers gained from their traditional "consultation" methods. It was not just that the wisdom of age was evident, but also the more complex ideas that arise through creative practice when we are given permission to imagine other ways we could live together as a society.

And their work did not produce piecemeal advice on the technicalities of width of pavements, or ramps for wheelchair access. Through making art they revealed an integrated and enlivened vision which imagined the relationships between generations, the changes in family structures, the functions of communal spaces and activities, the look and feel of spaces and the built and visual environment's deeper relationship to community, to work, to learning and to cultural life.

Now the Public Wisdom Group is moving onto commissioning a work from the artist Kevin Atherton, a project, which will directly explore the nature of ageing in the public realm.

Cubitt are establishing new methods for working through visual arts at another Day Centre where the attenders are people living with degrees of dementia.

■ Creative campaigns

Collective Encounters have a strong and explicit mission to involve people in arts participation to explore and influence social change. Based in Liverpool, their theatre productions have tackled many of the most pressing concerns facing older people and their

communities – from regeneration to the health service, pension crisis to the economy, ageism to dementia. For three years running their **Third Age Theatre Company** has performed at the annual National Pensioners' Convention in Blackpool.

Participant, Barbara Davies said:

"it was the most important and hardest thing I've ever done in my life."

Sarah Thornton, founding Director of Collective Encounters, is carrying out research looking at international models for ways in which theatre can make an impact beyond personal and local transformations: ways that theatre can influence changes in policy and provision.

"Whether it be the health sector, legislation for carers, homeless support services or policy affecting young people, we hope to find ways in which both our professional work and the theatre our participants create can have a real and lasting impact. To find ways that theatre can really enable people to connect more directly to the processes of democracy and change."

With support from The Baring Foundation over the next three years a new programme – *Live and Learn* – will explore the impact that engagement in the arts can have on people with dementia through workshops in care homes, private homes and day care settings. It will include the development of an arts and reminiscence toolkit for carers and the training of third age volunteers in arts and reminiscence techniques. The project was launched at Tate Liverpool to an audience of healthcare professionals, decision makers with Liverpool City Council, Liverpool PCT, community participants and representatives from other local and national arts organisations with an interest in this field.

Partnerships with a variety of policy and providers in older people's care are essential to the company's commitment to translate cultural action into policy change. Hugh Norman, Head of Workforce Development for Dementia North West recognised the power of their processes: when he saw *Now and Then* – a performance about the everyday experiences of carers and those living with dementia. He said:

"This is how we should be training people in future."



Collective Encounters perform 'In Our Times'. Photographer: Ged Fleming, *In Our Times*, June 2012.

As shown in Section Two, Re-Live's work employs powerful personal testimony to unveil subjects that demand public attention. Their recent production, *Abandoned Brothers*, involved the personal live testimony and performances of two war veterans and those who care for and about them, living with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The performances and craftsmanship of the play was very powerful as story-telling theatre. Presented at **Chapter Arts Centre** in Cardiff, it drew audiences, many of whom had the opportunity to influence aspects of relevant policy and thinking. A young critic wrote that the piece was so personal and powerful she felt unable immediately to review it but then:

"Having had a few days to fully comprehend what I witnessed I feel obliged to write something of these inspirational men and women to continue raising awareness. Some day soon hopefully this awareness will turn into action."

■ Participating in a city-wide policy

In 2007 **Manchester City Council** established an initiative called the *Valuing Older People Cultural Offer* (VOPCO), building on early work during the city's annual Full of Life Festival where the city's arts organisation offered older residents tasters of creative activities. The Manchester Ageing Strategy aims to improve the quality of life of older residents and reconnect older people from some of the more deprived areas of Manchester with the city's world class cultural opportunities. The cultural aspect has become an important part of the many ways Valuing Older People is tackling some of the challenges of urban ageing.

By 2010 the city had become the first UK city to achieve the **World Health Organisation** (WHO) designation as an Age-Friendly City. To achieve this status cities must demonstrate achievements against a number of objectives, importantly that:

- Older people are regularly consulted by public, voluntary and commercial services on how to serve them better.
- Decision-making bodies in public, private and voluntary sectors encourage and facilitate membership of older people.

WHO also stipulates that *"...., older people must be involved as full partners. In assessing a city's strengths and deficiencies, older people will describe how the checklist of features matches their own experience of the city's positive characteristics and barriers. They should play a role in suggesting changes and in implementing and monitoring"*.

Working with older people is a key feature of the wider programme and has informed the engagement of older people in the cultural programme. A practical example is the involvement of older participants to finesse funding applications to ensure that the focus of projects and programmes meet the needs of the diverse communities of Manchester and are targeted appropriately to those parts of the city where uptake of cultural opportunities is low.

The support from The Baring Foundation to employ a co-ordinator (Sherry DeWynter) has enabled the group to put a bright spotlight on working with older people and has seen a significant shift in the focus of the city's arts and heritage organisations' education programmes, which all now include a commitment to working with disadvantaged older people. VOPCO's 22 member organisations have increased attendance and participation by older people in the cultural life of the city; adapted and diversified the cultural offer by closer collaboration with older people and developed a series of bespoke creative projects targeted at excluded or vulnerable groups.

Amongst such organisations as **Whitworth Art Gallery, Royal Exchange Theatre, Library Theatre, Hallé Orchestra and Manchester's Museums**, collaborative programmes have developed for older people to visit these central venues as part of a themed 'cultural tour'. Connections are also being made through partners such as housing providers to reach sheltered accommodation and residential settings across the city and there are some exciting examples of specific projects working with people with dementia and their carers.

Band on the Wall is a Manchester music venue which came to fame in the 1970s and 1980s as the place to discover Punk and the talents of John Cooper Clarke, Joy Division, the Fall, and Buzzcocks. In 2010 Joyce Gill was in her late sixties, single and living in sheltered accommodation. As she told me:

"I know people at my age who are really old, but I wanted a place to go where I enjoy a dance, in a safe place like I used to in younger years – not a tea dance, and not a singles club."

She knew there were others like her who felt excluded from the music scene in Manchester. After a determined quest to find a venue that understood the gap and the potential, Joyce found Band on the Wall were really willing to help. With a small steering group and the help of Band On The Wall's Education Manager, Tim Chatterton, advising on negotiations with bands and the business of music promotions, *My Generation* was a very quick success and has now been running for two years. It is marketed to sheltered housing, through Facebook and word of mouth and has a growing membership aged from their late 50s to late 80's. Joyce's determination has transformed her retirement years and is a very important part of her busy life and sense of belonging in Manchester:

"I'm a Mancunian through and through, a busy grandmother and I've now got a partner. Getting stuck into this has been my way of giving back to the city that's been so good to me. It's given me confidence and I think I've made a difference to people – who had nowhere to go to have this kind of fun. If you want change you've got to do something about it."

Embedded in the city-wide ageing strategy, which goes across departments such as transport, housing, health, education, social services and culture, the Cultural Offer for Older People was better understood by commissioners of many services and the cultural sector became increasingly understood and championed as a critical aspect of an age-friendly city.

One of the key elements of the programme is the development of a large and growing cohort of *Cultural Champions* – currently over 100 older volunteers who benefit from various trips, discounts, information, and become the lynch pins for dissemination of opportunities amongst their peers and neighbours right across all wards of the city. They enjoy a purposeful role as agents to encourage other older people to get involved in and shape the cultural life of the city. Their input into designing projects has strengthened many proposals and finessed funding bids and the success of many ideas in action.

The Valuing Older People Cultural Offer enshrines the value of maintaining the voices of older people at many different levels of cultural practice, and policy decision making, advocacy and planning. Manchester's example is inspiring several other cities and towns in the UK and beyond. At the last *My Generation* Band on the Wall gig a coach-load of pensioners from Huddersfield turned up!

Section 4 *The power of art*

The Skylight

*You were the one for skylights. I opposed
Cutting into the seasoned tongue-and-groove
Of pitch pine. I liked it low and closed,
Its claustrophobic, nest-up-in-the-roof
Effect. I liked the snuff-dry feeling,
The perfect, trunk-lid fit of the old ceiling.
Under there, it was all hutch and hatch.
The blue slates kept the heat like midnight thatch.
But when the slates came off, extravagant
Sky entered and held surprise wide open.
For days I felt like an inhabitant
Of that house where the man sick of the palsy
Was lowered through the roof, had his sins forgiven,
Was healed, took up his bed and walked away.*

Seamus Heaney

(from *Opened Ground Poems 1966-1996*; published by Faber and Faber Ltd. 2002)

Participatory arts and artists specialising in that movement have always been concerned with questions of power, choice, control and leadership. There are many different ways of negotiating those relationships within the act of making art.

■ Governance and steering groups

Some arts organisations, including **East London Dance**, concerned to tackle issues of power and self-determination up front, have chosen the route of establishing representation on their boards or project steering groups to enshrine a formal voice for older people to influence policy and express their own needs, ideas and preferences. When it came to appoint an Artistic Director for **Generation XYZ**, the participants were practically involved in the selection – taking part in a demonstration workshop led by the candidates and having a place on the interview panel.

Entelechy Arts based in East London, has established very strong principles of enshrining leadership by older people and structures for their very active core members to make decisions on the company's work with and for older people.

Magic Me, who specialise in bringing together groups of retired and older people with those who are school age, tried to establish a steering group of elders for their ambitious

2012 project, *Weekend at Wilton's*, created in partnership with **Duckie**. In practice though, they found understandable and genuine limitations on time, stamina and interest for many older or younger people to take part in the practical project work as well as the planning meetings and decision making.

Taking part in a public performance was nevertheless an experience of great celebration for those who took part, and sometimes that is the most pragmatic and effective approach. After all, in most circumstances, being part of making a show is about taking some leaps of faith, trusting the director and taking part in the adventure. Motivation and choice comes from the activity being meaningful and exciting. Participants in *Weekend at Wilton's* summed it up:

"this has given me a new lease of life;" "The highlight for me was how the group pulled together when the show went wrong"; " I was terrified the first night, the second was ok and the 3rd was great."

At **Aune Head Arts** Jennie Hayes is the Creative Producer for a raft of projects with older people in rural Devon. One element involves older people in radio production in collaboration with **Soundart Radio**, the Ofcom-licensed community radio station for Totnes and Dartington, also broadcasting to the internet. Jennie is the producer and therefore holds leadership responsibility for the programme, but she is always interested in the kind of collaborative relationships she builds with co-artists and participants. For example, she found the relationships to be enhanced by the fact that she too needed to learn alongside the older participants as she was no expert in the technical side of radio production and in that sense during training sessions she shared an equal footing with the older participants.

She considers the question of leadership and power very central to the values of Aune Head Arts and her own approach as an artist working in any community. She is particularly interested in the negotiation of power, especially with groups whose opportunities and capacity for taking a lead may be limited by time, stamina, confidence and experience, as is frequently the case with frailer older people. She described to me how developing a collaborative and empowering approach with participants requires a long period of building trust and brilliant listening skills. Jennie emphasises that the practice of empowerment and collaboration is more complex and subtle than any pat rules about structures of representation or governance.

"It's an ethical and practical issue of how much you can lay on the table at what point and not overwhelm people with a complex over-arching aim."

Her experience suggests that it is unreasonable to expect a group of people to learn a new skill, learn how to work together, have control over new production processes, define the content of the project, think through the issues around distribution and make all the decisions on every aspect of a complex project. In practice the artists make pragmatic judgements and evolve a rolling expansion of the groups' and individuals' input of ideas and readiness to be involved in aspects of decision-making that shape the project. It is a step by step approach of building confidence and adapting to people's desire and capacity to choose whatever degree of participation they want.

"There are gradual shifts of power over time with the emphasis on the authentic opportunities for making an input and building commitment at a sustainable pace."

■ Honest choices

Collective Encounters choose to be transparent about their role, their resources, their processes and their aims. Their website states what they are about, and the company offers choice and transparency to those that join them:

“We use theatre as a tool for social change: engaging those on the margins of society, telling untold stories and tackling the local, national and international concerns of our time.”

Cubitt Gallery and Studios’ work described in Section Three throws up a different way of seeing power and choice. Daniel Baker, Director of Education at Cubitt, explains that the themes of the Senior Arts Class are not “led” by the participants – but they are shaped and chosen by Cubitt “responsively”:

“Participants value being there to learn. Their attitude is: “I choose: I’ll come if I want to.”

The Public Realm theme began as a rather abstract concept but people explored it through practice and once the impact of their work on planners and the public was becoming clearer, the transactions between the arts organisation and the participants changed again. Cubitt had set a series of practical and transparent tasks, one step at a time: to consider the Islington Green space and re-imagine it, show their ideas publicly, and engage with the responses. Cubitt gave the participants space, support, a framework and tools to carry it out. Participants freely opted in, not to “being consulted” but to being commissioned. A role that older people are decreasingly required to fulfil and seldom expected to take on with the imagination, skill and energy that the Public Wisdom group sustained.

This example and the way in which Plantation Productions work and many others is a pragmatic collaboration between artist and participants, with trust at the heart of it.

■ Taking back control

Ben McManus, sound artist, gives the person he’s working with space to explore sensations through new technology. He then builds on how they are using it and is relaxed but alert to what seems to be motivating them. Ernie was originally from Poland. Sounds and activities that are out of his control seemed to make him quite distressed. Ben introduces him to an i-pad with a basic colour composition app, twinned with piano music. It was later discovered that Ernie had been an accordion player. Ben brought an accordion in to subsequent sessions but Ernie seemed to engage more when using i-pad composition apps of various kinds.

In this case Ernie went on to make a short composition and was willing (even pleased) to let Ben join in using the same app on his phone to make a complimentary track (sort of jamming). The staff were very shocked by how different Ernie’s reaction was to sound, which he normally seemed to hate when not in his control. They had seldom seen him smile.

■ From commissioned to commissioning

New Brewery Arts are developing a project for elderly carers to commission a new work of art of their own specification from a ceramic artist. This approach offers another form of participation in arts and in exercising creative choice as well as experiencing the process of self-expression that the creative choices involve.

This project evolved from one involving eight adults with learning disabilities, who were initially involved in craft workshops and visits to craft studios. This helped develop knowledge and skills which aided the eventual commissioning process. Local craft workers



Ernie and Ben explore a basic colour composition app, twinned with piano music. Photographer: Anne Kinnaird.

and artists submitted photographs and examples of their work for selection. They included a wide range of craft disciplines from glass and ceramics to leatherwork and textiles. Artists welcomed this opportunity to engage with a new client group too.

Each participant was visited at home by the project coordinators. These home settings varied from residential care homes or sheltered accommodation to private family homes.

"We discussed each person's likes and dislikes and how they used their personal space. This gave us a sense of how their home environment works for them in terms of aesthetics and function."

A meeting followed at each home between the participant and their chosen craft worker. Further examples of the maker's work were shown to provide a range of options and help develop ideas. Further meetings took place to develop the commissions concentrating on different factors like design, style and colour.

Some participants were able to go to the craft workers' studios to observe and try out the processes involved in the creation of their commissions. This proved to be a very valuable experience, sometimes resulting in important changes being made to the commissions.

Each piece of work had personal significance and a story attached to it. The finished commissions were photographed in situ, before being exhibited. After this, each piece of work was returned to its owner and placed in the domestic environment where it belongs.

This approach offered people an authentic experience of participation and power – the ability to make choices, represent their own feelings, preferences, and taste. New Brewery Arts are now developing the commissioning process with a group of older people who are themselves carers of a family member with dementia at home. In partnership with the local respite care service, participants will work with ceramicist Claire Loder to create a ceramic portrait of their family member. In this instance the artist has been selected by the arts centre but the participants will have control over the way in which their loved one is depicted – the qualities that the piece expresses and the ways in which their multiple past and present facets come out in the works. This might be a process of exploring in a way that art is so capable of – the complexities of loss of powers on several levels, through process and product.

■ The ultimate commission

Serpentine Gallery's project, *Skills Exchange: Urban Transformation and the Politics of Care*, commissioned artist Marcus Coates to work with outpatients at St John's Hospice. Coates is a renowned contemporary artist best known for "shamanic" artworks such as *The Plover's Wing* (2009). He began this project at the hospice with the question "What can I do for you?" Suggestions ranged from the creation of a photography exhibition to a trip to the Amazon Rainforests. The latter of these requests was made by Alex H. In 2010 Coates undertook the journey to the Amazon following Alex H's precise instructions and on his return he created an installation and book entitled *The Trip*.

The installation portrayed two recorded conversations between Coates and Alex H and a static video shot of the window of Alex H's room in St John's, looking onto the street below. The first is recorded as the light fades outside. Alex tells Marcus what he would like to see and do, the questions he has for the indigenous people and the way he would like to approach them. The second is set within the same view in winter morning light, Coates tells of the vivid green of the forest, the sounds of the buzzing birds and chirping cicadas. He brings back the answers that Alex H wanted to ask of the Huaorani people he encountered. Alex H probes Coates for more detail and asks:

"Did you find that doing this on my behalf, sometimes you wanted to dominate and take over? I don't think one could have resisted it, and I can't imagine that you are that self-controlled. I could be wrong."

For some this project might appear to be the ultimate illustration of the indulgence of the contemporary artist. For me the little white book with the transcripts of the conversations between Marcus Coates and Alex H is an artwork as profound on the subject of the power of art as any I have encountered.

■ Artists being led by people with dementia

Spare Tyre creates theatre "with voiceless communities." I observed their project, *Once Upon a Time*, at a nursing home in Luton. It was designed for people with severe dementia – people locked in their worlds unable to connect/communicate or apparently have control over decision-making at any level.

The participants were variously slumped or agitated, mute or idiosyncratically ranting. Some had no means of standing up and some had no control to sit still. The usual means of



Spare Tyre's 'Once Upon a Time'. Photograph copyright of Patrick Baldwin.

“reading” people’s needs and desires were extremely disrupted by their illness and perhaps through their medication. It seemed to me impossible that a one hour theatre based performance could be a good idea for this “high support client group”.

Once Upon a Time is a multi-sensory interactive storytelling programme designed to be highly responsive to interaction with participants’ specific modes of communication and physicality. The Artistic Director, Arti Prashar, set out to celebrate *“the here, the now and the future, recognising people’s creative abilities without resorting to prejudice, pity, or notions of reminiscence about the good old days.”*

The three artists were highly skilled communicators as Dr Martha C. Pollard of the Centre for Cognitive Ageing and Cognitive Epidemiology, at University of Edinburgh, who saw the project at Adamwood Care Home a week later also observed:

“They went to each person in the room in turn. “Hello, Sarah, my name is Helen,” Helen said, as she took the hand of a resident, touched her arm gently, looked into her eyes, and smiled. And there she stayed for more than a minute, touching her hand, looking in her eyes – welcoming the gift of Sarah, just as she was. And so to the next, and the next, until each one of the residents had been slowly welcomed personally, by both Helen and Hema, as a gift, just as they were.”

They used enlarged gesture and expression without altering the integrity of this as adult discourse. Their skills also lay in an extraordinary alertness to any responses and behaviour

the patients showed. These were the skills of drama practitioners trained and adapted for the context of people with dementia. In this respect the artists were at all times led by the responses of the participants, adapting the pace and content of the performance to accommodate the fullest possible participation of the patients.

It was interesting to observe how, with the best of intentions, the care staff tended to try and encourage and chivy their patients to make the “right” responses and minimise what they saw as disruptive behaviour. The Spare Tyre artists, on the other hand, calmly and clearly modelled ways of accepting all behaviour and of being led by those “disruptive” responses and others, as they were very often meaningful if given their own space to be understood.

It was clear that participants made connections with moments of the story. A story of an old woman and her three children, told in three parts using all the senses to tell the tale. It was performed three times at weekly intervals to the same participants and it was clear that the residents’ responsiveness had grown week on week. At the final event there was a marked increase in alertness and responsiveness and clear signs of enjoyment and all the familiar amazement and enjoyment of carers and staff at the different kinds of interaction patients demonstrated.

Living without access to memory or an ability to express the future demands a strong attention to the sensory nature of the here and now. The additional element that such a well-made artform brings is a sense of play, make-believe and narrative as essentially human characteristics. In young children play and make-believe have been shown to connect to their ability to learn and develop. It seems they play an important part at stages of dementia when the pressure to remember and plan for the future is no longer necessary.

Just as a good children’s book needs to be rewarding to the adult reading it to the child, *Once Upon a Time* was captivating for the residents, the staff, and the actors. It was a work of art that was a dignified, profound and meaningful experience to be shared by all. It made us all more human.

Dr Martha C. Pollard again:

“I can think of no better way to tell of the kind of world I would want to see for all people with dementia: a world that celebrates each person exactly as they are, with their own feelings to feel, and their own ways of being. If in my life I become unable to communicate by speech, or in conventional ways, and the world finds me a problem, or refers to me first and foremost with a medical label, then people like these storytellers and care staff at Adamwood Care Home are people I want to meet. These are the kinds people I hope would care for and come be with me, to receive me and welcome me as a gift, exactly as I am, and in so doing open doors to let light and love flow in once more, if even for a moment. For in such moments, eternity shines.”

■ No simple rules to empowerment

The above examples illustrate the many ways in which the sharing of power and leadership can be enacted in the processes of making art. There are no rules, as the situations and the artforms, the settings and the ambitions are all very different. Do-as-you-would-be-done-by is as good a rule as any. At the “coal face” of participatory arts the dilemma remains for artists and participants – that artists are often the people with the greater degree of power and choice while participants are passive subjects for being “enabled”. This dilemma should continue to be struggled with at all steps of the way, through the process of making meaning for each other, we may be able to unlock some truths about ways of being.

Section 5 *In the mix*

“Strangers used to gather together at the cinema and sit together in the dark, like Ancient Greeks participating in the mysteries, dreaming the same dream in unison.”

Angela Carter, *Shaking a Leg*

At the 2012 Creating A New Old Conference delegates and speakers discussed whether there is a field of practice which has enough commonality and purpose to “Arts and Older People” to be a field of practice or a movement.

There is always a contention between the strength and learning that can be gained from an esprit de corps and the exclusions and oppressions that are implicit in being confined to a ghetto. There is a genuine issue in our country of the isolation of older people and the lack of choices available to us in old age. Even in cultures which have a strong extended family tradition the ways in which life is organised is separating generations in daily ways.

Many of the examples I have drawn on, in all the sections of this book, illustrate in some way the value to participants and to artists of combatting the separation of older people from the rest of the community and the everyday fabric and action of life. For many arts organisations specialising in participatory practice, mixing generations has been part of their work for many years, without being given any labels such as “arts for older people or “inter-generational arts”.

In larger cities and towns generations are increasingly separated with cultural activities designed for and promoted to “target markets” in dedicated spaces. In a village young people may have nowhere to go that is theirs. As old age gets longer, extended families move to the cities and transport gets scarcer, growing old in a rural area gets increasingly isolated.

Rural Media Company is an award winning media education, production and development charity established in 1992 in Hereford. One of the hallmarks of Rural Media Company’s work is its ‘whole community’ approach to making community films. Often working in one market town or parish for up to a year, the company works with local people of all ages to produce mini-feature films. These projects usually involve hundreds of participants, investing them with practical and creative skills, whilst creating unique opportunities for residents to reflect upon their community’s history and contemporary issues, and then share their views with audiences locally, nationally and internationally.



*Storer Court resident Pat Pullen and Writer/Director Rachel Lambert making the film 'Getting Close'.
Photographer: Dan Salter.*

A recent community film called *Still Life* was produced in the market town of Bromyard, Herefordshire in which over 300 people participated in various capacities. The value of these projects was summed up by one 70 year old participant, Ted Taylor:

"Thoroughly, thoroughly enjoyed it. It's been a wonderful year. You meet the 6 year olds and the 80 year olds. Before you know where you are they're learning skills. I'm not their (young people) school teacher who's there every day of the week, telling them what to do. I'm there and we're in it together. In the mix!"

In 2012 Rural Media Company managed *Back to the Future* – a project which brought together older people living in rural sheltered housing with residents from Supported Housing Foyers, which support young people with housing needs, to create new films in rural Worcestershire and Herefordshire.



Although at opposite ends of the age spectrum, both groups shared very similar housing needs, and the project enabled them not only to share their stories but also to challenge their pre-conceptions about one another. Both groups had incredible stories to tell, some built on 80 years of experience, some just on 16. The young people's day to day lives were generally more chaotic and disparate than those of the elderly people, while the elderly people had a fairly fixed timetable that was partially structured around activities, meal times and rests. Managing these timetables required careful negotiation.

Adrian Lambert, Artistic Director, explained:

"Initially we worked with both groups separately, gaining their trust and confidence and allowed them to explore ideas and preconceptions about each other. We also introduced them to the technology we would be using on the project and gave both groups the chance

to explore and play with the media equipment. One of the chair bound elderly residents took a video camera on a journey around the home. She put the camera on her lap and whizzed around all the rooms, amongst the activities and into the flats, narrating as she went."

The Rural Media Company team asked both groups to come up with a list of questions to ask each other, and then produced 'digital postcards' to send to one another. The postcard consisted of a quick 'hello' followed by a little bit of information about themselves such as how long they'd been a resident, what their interests were and some family details. Each group then produced a response.

For some it genuinely began the process of re-thinking their preconceptions about each other, for example, surprise that someone who had so many piercings had 'such a lovely speaking voice'. Both groups, as with most people, were guilty of judging others on face value, often lumping groups together with generalisations and learned perceptions.

From this 'digital conversation' it was decided that a film screening at Storer Court, (the residential home) would be the ideal way to bring both groups together for the first time with the young people insisting that the elderly people select the film. Six young people from the Foyer, one with a three month old baby, paid a visit to the home. Everyone was introduced and recognised each other from the postcards, then they sat together to watch *South Pacific*, a favourite of Storer Court.

As the groups mingled and shared tea and cake, early casual remarks about young people 'doing nothing, draining the State, having babies and getting council flats' went out of the window when presented with a real person with real issues, a real baby to care for and a house or flat to find.

Once *South Pacific* had finished, ideas and stories were shared and dates were fixed for the next workshop to begin to explore ideas for the film that would be made together. Over time the idea for the screenplay that would eventually become *Getting Close* took shape. Scripts would be drafted during or after the workshops, then re-read and dissected at the next meeting. Gathering personal experiences and stories from both groups was essential to the script devising process, and the story also conveyed some of the preconceptions that had been aired by both groups.

Rachel Lambert, Writer and Project Director, found it

"fascinating to hear the elderly residents talk with such delight about some of their own indiscretions or misdemeanours as younger people and yet be so hard and unforgiving at some of the 'behaviour' they had experienced (or read about!)."

All of the key events in the final script were events that had happened to a number of different participants in one or both of the groups: there was a surprise, but much loved baby, born to a young couple; a lost grandson killed in Afghanistan; an envied older brother who was in the services and who 'never did anything wrong'; grandchildren who 'never come to see me'.

The shoot for the film took place over a period of five days and was shot by the young people, mentored by professional filmmakers. Rural Media Company had originally thought that some of the elderly residents may be interested in the technical roles, but although they had enjoyed using the equipment in the workshops they had no real desire to use it in

a production context. They did however want to perform and worked with the team and crew to overcome many challenging issues of mobility and memory to turn in great performances.

The film was premiered at Storer Court on a large portable cinema screen with both groups in attendance and assorted friends and relatives. The reaction was one of surprise that it was 'so good', both groups were bowled over by the professionalism of the production and found it very moving and thought provoking. One of many participants' summaries:

"I think it's lovely, it makes our lives tick."

With several years of emphasis on working with young people, Rural Media Company's founding Director, Nic Millington, told me:

"The whole community approach has been highly rewarding in terms of the company's wider purpose for its creative role – to strengthen rural communities and challenge disadvantage. There is a richness in the texture of stories that emerge when generations mix and a quality to the relationships that grow – that is often less possible when people are only secure in their peer groups."

As Nic himself approaches his 60s, he has become more aware of how the emphasis on youth can also encourage an inadvertent dismissal of older people. The demographic changes in rural areas make a growing elderly rural population in danger of experiencing increasing separation and isolation while the young continue to struggle with the lack of transport, housing and jobs. Nic reflects on the question of whether there is a special field of practice of arts and older people:

"Although we have to seek resources to do our work – that may have been targeted by philanthropists or public funders to support one specific group or another – young people, older people, Travellers, refugees etc. our practice has always been about enabling people to be "in the mix" enabling them to play a more active and creative part in their own communities."

Getting Close was awarded second prize in the International Citizen Media Awards, which celebrated and reflected the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations 2012.

Magic Me has established its identity as an inter-generational arts company for over 20 years in east London. Their key aim is "to bring generations together to build a stronger safer community". They enable young people aged 8+ and adults aged 60+ to meet and team up through shared, creative activity. Intergenerational groups might meet on a weekly basis in schools, museums, older people's clubs, care homes, community and cultural organisations. Participants are often diverse in culture and faith as well as age group.

Magic Me's team of freelance creative artists: musicians, dancers, photographers, printmakers, writers and drama specialists design activities to stimulate conversation and an exchange of ideas. In 2012 their work in association with **LIFT** (London International Festival of Theatre) and the 2012 Cultural Olympiad produced several projects as well as *Weekend at Wilton's* described in section three.

Magic Me's project, *View from the Top*, celebrated the people and places along High St 2012 – the road leading from the City east towards the Olympic Park. The Number 205 buses

that serve this route (providing an estimated 2,495,956 passenger journeys during the timescale of the arts project) opened passengers' eyes to the passing scene, by a beautiful artwork on the bus ceiling and a soundscape podcast. Over 120 children and older people worked with Surya Turner (poet/story-teller) and Janet Brooke (printmaker) to represent their explorations of past and present business life. Groups investigated workplaces along the High Street, from the Whitechapel Bell Foundry to the bus garage, and market stalls to international businesses.

Where the Heart Is, was Magic Me's ninth annual project with **The Women's Library, Mulberry School for Girls** and local older women. It was a site-specific performance that took people on a 'walk of love'. The audience were given a map and iPods with six evocative podcasts created by east-end women aged from 15 to 80, to listen to on their walk. The group shared tales of passion, friendship and belonging which are reflected in the spaces and places of Aldgate and Brick Lane, inspired by the collection at The Women's Library.

The term inter-generational has tended to be applied to a kind of generic idea of grandparents and school children, while in reality a 70 year old and a 90 year old might hail from two quite separate generations and for many people a grandparent might be in their 30s and great grandparents in their 50s. This reminds us that any generality about a group called "older people" is a very difficult concept and yet being coy or embarrassed about the facts about ageing and old age seems to me to be problematic too.

Conclusions

You always know after you are two. Two is the beginning of the end.

J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*

Mike White, a speaker at Bealtaine's 2012 Creating A New Old Conference made a strong case for the arts' distinctive qualities and processes for social engagement in a whole community context. He described the work of Mary Robson and other arts based practitioners who, with teachers and health professionals, have brought a sustained and imaginative set of processes to improve the health and resilience of the community of Dewsbury, across generations. Their work in the local primary school found an artistic and ritual form for the school-age children going through an early and significant moment of ageing – transition to the big school. The year 6 pupils make lanterns, designed as poetic expressions of their hopes for the future, and parade up the hill to their new secondary school, watched along the route by the community – parents, grandparents and those even older than that. At the "big school" the head-teachers exchange their pledges of responsibility to nurture the aspirations and welfare of the children as they move to this important new phase of their life. The annual VJ ceremony of WW2 veterans sits alongside the (now annual) *Transition Parade*. The whole community shares this rite of passage to understand the continual processes of transition that accompany our whole lives.

In a direct lineage from the work of **Welfare State International** (one of the pioneering arts companies of the 1970s whose alumni are found in three generations of arts practice and policy leaders now), people in Dewsbury have the skills to create and embed expressions of values that are inclusive and relevant to all ages. They are looking at the act of ageing and making it part of a whole life in a whole community.

■ Out of the ghetto

Throughout my working life youth arts and arts for youth have been enshrined in public funding policy and enacted in arts organisations' policies; buildings have been built to house it, artists have been trained to specialise in it. Of course every generation in every society has an obligation to ensure that the next generations flourish. Every child indeed matters.

But whether done inadvertently or consciously, separating generations from generations on such a scale is proving disastrous for all parties. This acceptance of mass positive discrimination towards the young is in danger of disguising a casual and widespread gerontophobia. As with all kinds of discrimination, there is a phase, when those who are the objects of that discrimination internalise that hatred, by apologising for themselves, limiting their own expectations or denying their own identity. The act of trying to stay young and prove one's worth can even be part of that denial.

Any movement or field needs, in my view, to encompass all that art can be, and all that human beings can be, and not be limited to any specific “impact” measures or “outcomes”. It does not even have to be ‘limited’ to giving people a new lease of life or a call to active ageing. One thing for certain is that we have an uncertain lease on life. We don’t know if we’ll reach 3rd age or 4th age but we do know we want them to be as good as they can be. I am uneasy about the terms 3rd and 4th age. The latter age is surely the final ghetto in all its original meaning of banishment, invisibility and worse.

If the Declaration of Human Rights gives the right *freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts*, the availability of ways of practising that right needs adjustment at different stages of life. A field of practice may be necessary to nudge those adjustments into life. I hope it will expand the possibilities for creative and expressive lives for all ages and stages of life.

If a field or movement for Arts and Older People can weather the ghettos and expose the humanity and realities of ageing, it is worth having. Much of the creative work that is gathering across this country and elsewhere is set to make an increasingly important contribution towards a shift in our society’s thinking towards arts and vitality for all of us whatever our age or stage in life.



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*Cover photograph: Making the film, 'Getting Close',
at Storers Court. Photographer: Dan Salter.*

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