

Art Angel: A Research Report



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CONTENTS

Contents	Page
Introduction and acknowledgements	2
Executive Summary	3
Section 1: Aims and Objectives of Research	5
Methods	6
Section 2: Context: Arts and mental health	8
Outsider Art and mental health	8
Arts therapy, community arts and social inclusion	9
Evaluation of the arts and well-being	10
Section 3: Research Evidence and Findings	13
Section 4: Experiencing art-work for mental health	14
4a) Creativity for mental health	14
4b) The social effects and impacts of creativity	17
4c) The difficulties of creative art work	21
Section 5: Experiencing Art Angel and the social dimensions to project participation	23
5a) The social benefits of project attendance	23
5b) Opportunities for development of artistic and social skills	26
5c) Difficulties with project participation	30
Section 6: Building community lives and identities	31
6a) Cross-community networking	32
6b) The social significance and outcomes of exhibitions	33
6c) Connecting with cultural and artistic communities	35
Section 7: The future, moving on and recovery	36
Section 8: Summary and conclusions	39
References	41

Introduction

This brief report documents some findings from an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded research project (**RES-000-27-0043**) on the outcomes of arts work for participants of community arts projects that are specifically geared towards people with mental health problems. It draws on qualitative research conducted during 2004 and 2005 with Art Angel, Dundee.

The research reported here forms just one part of a larger academic project concerning mental health and social inclusion, and in which one other community arts organisation for mental health was also accessed. A larger report about the arts and mental health and which combines the findings from both organisations is forthcoming.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the staff and artists of Art Angel for their generous assistance in conducting this research project.

Executive Summary

In summary, participation in Art Angel has had a range of largely positive impacts on the people with mental health problems that use the project. Using evidence from their narrated experiences these can be summarised as follows:

The experience of arts for mental health is reported to have facilitated

- Increased self-understanding
- Prompted self esteem
- Facilitated self-directed therapeutic processes
- Opportunities for self-evaluation
- Feelings of stability
- Positive ‘ripple effects’ to friends and family
- Improved communications skills
- Involved challenges and difficulties
- Increased senses of resilience

The experience of Art Angel project participation is reported to have facilitated:

- Structure and regular routines
- Social and emotional capital
- Progressive participation in a range of activities
- Incremental skills development
- Training opportunities
- Learning opportunities
- Fears about sustainable funding and associated social support
- Artistic development

The experience of community lives beyond (but related to) the Art Angel project is reported to have involved

- Cross-community networking
- Opportunities for travel, research, planning and managing projects
- Exhibiting in mainstream cultural venues
- Building different community identities and status through the arts
- Building different senses of place and belonging in community and cultural networks
- Partial self-identification as artists

The experience of visioning a future within and beyond Art Angel is reported to have involved:

- Moving on to other projects and community roles
- Returning to paid work
- Engaging in educational and work training activities
- Taking on new responsibilities and roles within the organisation
- Creating distance from previously isolated social positions

There are profound current challenges for Art Angel in terms of its management, sustainable income and planning for the future which are not addressed in this report. In terms of the reported benefits for project artists, however, the organisation can be seen to be facilitating important changes and benefits that are orientated around both social and artistic development, and therefore the work of Art Angel clearly links with multi-agency agendas for social inclusion.

Section 1

Aims and objectives of research

Academic context

This work is part of a larger funded research programme [ESRC RES-000-27-0043] about mental health and social inclusion and concerns how people with mental health problems experience social stability through participating in different kinds of spaces. The spaces under investigation are categorised as natural, artistic and technological. What this means in practice is that the research programme evaluates examples of innovative community programmes and projects that facilitate the participation of people with mental health problems in (i) gardening activities, (ii) arts work and (iii) the use of the internet for social support.

The research programme is primarily academic in orientation, however, the research conducted as part of this programme *also* has implications for users of service, practitioners and policy makers. As such the results are being made available in easily accessible formats in terms of printed reports, a web-site with further information and data (<http://www.dundee.ac.uk/geography/inclusion/>) and a short video film 'Recovering Lives: mental health, gardening and the arts' (made by LUNA and distributed by the Scottish Executive's *National Programme for Improving Mental Health and Well-Being in Scotland*).

Objectives and research questions

In terms of the research with Art Angel, this section of the study set out to investigate the relationship between community arts activities and people with severe and enduring mental health problems in terms of the following overall questions:

- What do project participants feel about the arts in terms of its implications for their mental health?
- What are the key outcomes of arts work for project participants?
- How does working with the arts help to achieve social inclusion and stability for people who access the project?
- What future changes might benefit the project and its participants?

The research reported here was not intended as an overall evaluation or full social audit of Art Angel organisationally, nor in terms of its funding and management, but rather, it primarily sought to engage the views of project participants (referred to as artists¹) about what were the key outcomes for them in social and psychological terms.

This research was also directed primarily by more academic questions about human selves and identities in everyday social life and spaces, although only the more user and policy friendly findings are reported here (but see Parr, forthcoming 2006).

Methods

Ethical permission from *The Tayside Committee on Medical Research Ethics* was attained in January 2004. In February 2004, 7 artists were interviewed with Art Angel. These 7 interviews were repeated in February 2005 in order to introduce a sense of comparison over time, and a further 6 interviews were undertaken with other staff and project participants in March 2005. In all 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews were undertaken as part of the research. Ethnographic (participant observation) work over the period of a year has also contributed to the research design, with a collaborative film-making

¹ It should be noted that not all project participants would self-identify as ‘artists’. However, in recognition that some may also not want to be categorised as ‘users’ or ‘clients’, this report uses this category to represent the people who contributed to the research. The implications of art project participation for social identity is addressed in the main body of the report.

project forming the main basis of this activity. The semi-structured interviews have been transcribed and analysed for key findings and themes using the NVivo software data management package.

Semi-structured interview schedules were used and these covered a variety of relevant themes such as:

- History of project attendance
- Initial and changing expectations of arts projects
- Outcomes of arts work
- Reflections on therapeutic aspects of arts work
- Reflections on the social and practical skills gained as a result of art work
- Reflections on questions of identity and inclusion
- Future prospects and visions

However, key themes were also *emergent* in interviews and thus responsive to the concerns of the project participants. Interviews were between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours long, and all but one were taped and carried out on-site at the Art Angel project, based currently in the Dudhope Arts Centre in Dundee.

It is noted that interviewees are not identifiable from quotations and false initials have been used to distinguish individual contributions. No interview materials from project staff are included in this report.

Section 2: Context: Art and mental health

Outsider Art and mental health

There is a specific history of the relationship between mental health, illness and art and this famously lies in the category of what is known as ‘outsider art’ or ‘art brut’ (Rhodes, 2000). In this typology artist outsiders are, by definition, different to their audience and are often thought of as being dysfunctional in respect of the parameters set by the dominant culture. In the case of mental health, outsider art and artists were often located and identified in the context of institutions, and indeed, psychiatric patients are a key group at the heart of early definitions of outsider art. ‘Insane art’, as it is also known, is primarily a 20th century phenomenon, although artistic expression by patients did exist before that, but was often thought to be valueless beyond its selective use for clinical teaching. The early collectors of insane art were psychiatrists themselves, with some using work to illustrate different forms of pathology (Gilman, 1995), while others, famously the likes of Hans Prinzhorn (1886-1933), amassed a large collection of insane art where the works considered were taken to have some kind of aesthetic value (Haywood Gallery, 1996).

Although there is still contemporary interest in outsider art², it is often criticised as a representative of stigmatising processes whereby artists are relegated to social and symbolic positions of isolation. Insane outsider art was produced mainly within psychiatric asylums – and in-line with anti-psychiatric critiques that have emerged in the recent past - the location of outsider artists in such marginalised spaces heavily signifies their ‘not belonging’ to mainstream society and their relative social exclusion.

² For example ‘The Scottish Collection of Extraordinary Art’ in Pittenweem, Fife, which includes the artwork of present and discharged psychiatric patients.

Arts therapy, community arts and social inclusion

Countering this very specific history, there are at least two main contexts to a more positive association between culture, the arts and social inclusion for people with serious and enduring mental health problems. The first of these is the development of art therapy within mental health care. Popular since the middle of the 20th century, this is, alongside therapeutic drug use, credited with the demise of the category of ‘pure’ outsider art/artists; as both therapeutic mediums have supposedly contributed to a ‘quietening’ of raw insanity and its artistic expression (Rhodes, 2000). While there may be all sorts of therapeutic benefits associated with the practice of art therapy (Hogan 2001), there is a common assumption that the art comes second to the therapy in this and similar rehabilitative practices, it being merely a tool for the rehabilitation of the damaged or pathological self. This argument may have implications for the social inclusion of patient-artists via cultural processes.

The second context that is broadly relevant here related to the benefits of community and public art whereby marginalised people and places are considered to gain access to empowering forms of representation and expression that help addressing instances of social exclusion (Sharp, Pollock and Paddison, 2004). The participation of people with severe and enduring mental health problems in community arts is likely to occur as a result of specific mental health and arts projects in community settings (like Art Angel). While certainly helping to disrupt the historic association between mental health and art in institutional space, the literature suggests that arts for health projects may engender experiences of what has been termed ‘bonding’ and not necessarily ‘bridging’ social capital for participants. If so, this outcome clearly then has implications for social integration and inclusion (White, 2003), questioning the success of what has been called an inclusive ‘arts advocacy’ approach which often underlies such initiatives (Maddern and Bloom, 2004). Despite this latter caveat, though, these two broad contexts above can be argued to have

contributed to a disruption of a negative association between mental health, arts and social exclusion, although there is a need to understand in more detail what *precisely* constitutes the association between arts and social inclusion in community settings

These contexts have been recently supplemented by arguments about cultural rights and citizenship, and with respect to mental health problems specifically, sections 25 and 26 of the new Mental Health Care and Treatment Act 2003 (in effect in Scotland in 2005) require local authorities to support the promotion of well-being and social development for people with mental health difficulties through the provision of social, cultural and recreational activities. In Scotland this legal provision is being cited as an impetus for the state to develop and implement an integrative mental health and arts strategy, one specifically looking to create sustainable links between mental health and creativity at both the local and national scale (see, for example, aspects of the Scottish Executive's *National Programme for Improving Mental Health and Well-being*). Embedded within such initiatives are assumptions about an inclusive citizenship that is achievable through arts activities, something that has been argued by the mental health lobby for some time. This assumption rests partly on the notion that participation in the arts entails inclusive social processes, but also that the arts are a resource whereby positive mental health awareness is raised and stigma is reduced (Dunn, 1999, p47).

Evaluation of the arts and well-being

One key challenge for arts and mental health projects is tied to questions of validity and evidence, as debates concerning the merits and limitations of qualitative and quantitative approaches pepper policy commentaries about the effectiveness of this pairing (Jermyn, 2001, White, 2003). Unsurprisingly self-evaluation by art practitioners and organisations has traditionally been relatively limited, qualitative, and often tied to the specific demands of funders (although there are examples of arts-on-prescription schemes which have been evaluated

using standard tools such as the General Health Questionnaire: White, 2003, Huxley, 1997). White (2003) notes that quantitative evidence, including costs comparisons with other health interventions, and longitudinal studies are almost completely lacking in this field, and it is also noted that ‘it is more difficult to provide evidence that these projects have an effect on mental health, social exclusion and civic participation’ (White, 2003, p11). Given the current resourcing of mental health projects like Art Angel, and the burden of administration on arts staff who do not necessarily have any research expertise, it is unrealistic to expect diverse and systematic data collection and interpretation about project participants and individual outcomes. The effects of such demands on local mental health and arts projects is that they struggle for credibility with statutory services which are uncomfortable with qualitative or creative evidence, and with the notion that well-being, social inclusion and recovery (often key aims of community mental health initiatives) may be tied to creativity and creative identities in complex ways.

Robust qualitative research that examines and represents subjective understandings of the social world is now recognised to have an important role in academic discourse and policy related research (Parr, 1998, 2000, Baxter and Eyles, 1997). Furthermore, it is vital that marginalised and vulnerable groups are given adequate opportunities to represent their understandings and world-views in relation to their everyday lives. If services are to be truly responsive to their users, then flexible and appropriate methodologies need to be put in place in order to fully facilitate their input into assessment and evaluation. This report uses qualitative methods in the form of semi-structured in-depth interviews and ethnographic participation in order to access complicated relationships with a particular art project. Quantitative indicators are considered inappropriate in the context of the research questions asked, and it is important that arts projects such as Art Angel be understood primarily in terms of their social functions. Evaluating the social functions of art projects does not simply mean recording data about reduced medication use, increases in numbers of

social contacts per day and so on, but requires us to think more carefully about questions of self-identity and self-esteem and individualised perceptions of recovery. Although standard statutory and medical approaches to evaluation may see such concerns as rather nebulous categories that are difficult to assess, these are precisely the areas where community mental health projects can make their most strategic and successful interventions. This report is thus orientated towards assessing some aspects of the complicated social relationship between ill self and the arts in the context of the Art Angel project in Dundee. This approach is in keeping with Scottish Executive's emphasis on learning from recovery stories (SRN, 2005) and understanding the cultural dimensions to well-being (National Programme for Improving Mental Health and Well-being, 2005).

Section 3: Research Evidence and Findings

Introduction

The activities of Art Angel involve work across a range of artistic mediums, including visual arts, craft making, writing, film-making and performance (I will term this all ‘art’ or ‘arts’ for the purposes of this report, although there are social and material differences between the artistic mediums used³). Art Angel also hosts LUNA, a next-steps arts organisation run by people with mental health problems and who engage in a range of arts activities that involve film-making, music recording and book publications. That there is a progressive route to different types of participation in the arts is a key benefit of the way in which Art Angel is organised.

There is no one clear route to participating in arts and mental health projects in general and Art Angel is no exception. Project artists are introduced to the project from a range of referral points including CPNs, social workers, GPs, and in-patient care workers. Informal access also occurs with self and social network referral. Interviewees who participated in this research had accessed the project (and its previously incarnation as Arts Advocacy) for time periods that ranged from 2 to 8 years. The interviewees had a range of arts experience from none at all to some college training. Art Angel does not require that new entrants have any art training and trial periods are organised to ascertain suitability of the organisation for the needs of prospective participants.

It is notable that on entry to the arts generically, and Art Angel specifically, that participants have few precise expectations beyond a general will to socialise with others and find a route out of difficult or isolating situations.

³ For example, film-making is often constructed as a collective, very social form of participation in the arts, whereby visual arts work or writing can be (although not necessarily) a more individualised experience. It should be noted that in Art Angel most arts activities are conducted in collective settings, and so maximise opportunities for social contact and peer support amongst participants.

'I didn't have any expectations, I was just glad to have somewhere to go. I hadn't any experience of anything like that before' (A, project artist)

'I wanted to meet people and friendship, rather the being on my own all the time' (B, project artist)

'I was at a low ebb and needed an interest' (S, project artist)

When asked about expectations from initial project participation, artists do not straightforwardly discuss well-being, recovery or skills development. This is perhaps a reflection of an individual state of mind or health at the time of entry to the project, but also about their lack of understanding about what an arts project may be able to offer them. Lack of detailed knowledge about the benefits of arts activity, and about Art Angel specifically, may be a characteristic of both new participants *and* referral agencies. There are noted contrasts between expectations at the beginning of project participation and expectations that evolve through experience at Art Angel and these shall be addressed at the end of the report.

Section 4: Experiencing art-work for mental health

In interviews and in everyday conversation with project artists they discussed their participation in the arts in many ways, but primarily as a non-clinical practice that involved experiences of stability and well-being. There are several dimensions to this experience for the participants of Art Angel and this section represents some of those complexities in order to record the benefits of creativity for health.

4a) Creativity for mental health

Experiences of stability and well-being were represented as emerging from different dimensions of arts experience. In discussing the links between creativity and well-being in particular, many participants evoked a complex fusion of thoughts, emotions, materials, movements

and imagination in the production of artwork. This fusion – experienced in the creative process of painting, making, writing, film-making and, in some cases, performing - was perceived as a beneficial and sometimes therapeutic interiority. Put more simply, artistic practice facilitated a sense of psychological locatedness, enabling a temporarily all-consuming occupational space that distracted from negative and disruptive thoughts and emotions:

'You get into so much, you're still aware [of people around you], but you're right into that painting. It lets me express myself, it's like therapy you know ... a couple or three hours ... it's 'pew' (gestures to head and smiles)' (L, project artist).

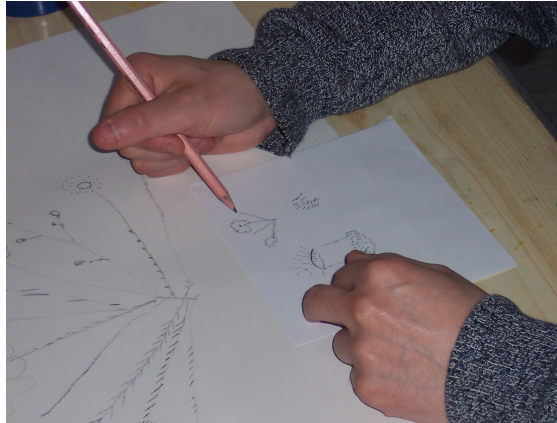
'It helps you focus on things and notice things, I didn't really see anything before and now I look, I see in front of me more. I'm lost for words here, I can't describe this, but there is a feeling about art, people need art, especially people in the situation I'm in ...' (A, project artist)

'It is therapeutic and this is where the art comes in, the focus in on the art. We express ourselves and it comes out ... you see people come here who are closed in by the illness ... but this is a practical forms of therapy' (N, project artist)

'When I'm ill, it's a need, to get something out on paper. I have to write things down or make colour. I have to make colour to communicate myself in some way' (O, project artist).

Although not always the case by any means, such comments demonstrate how individual artists encounter 'interior creative space' as a positive and safe location that can be accessed as part of a strategy for recovery. The emotional and psychological dimensions to art-making were also characterised by the importance of practising and sensing boundaries. For people who were particularly ill or experiencing difficulties, their sense of a bounded and coherent self was sometimes tied to the physical art object itself:

'I started on paper mache balls, because it was trying to bind myself to something. So it would be, if I felt I was losing the place, I could do paper mache balls because one ball has a finishing you know? It's a finished object ... a boundary' (R, project artist).



In these and other ways, the practice of artwork (with the support of Art Angel facilitators) had a value in terms of assisting project participants with their sense of recovery, emotional and psychological stability. Being able to develop and experience such beneficial outcomes, however, is particularly dependent on the ability to work in safe and supportive social environments (see section 5). In summary, when asked about the experience of art for mental health, project participants would also use descriptor words that expressed a range of positive emotions and associations:

Reported effects of art work for mental health
Calming
Focusing
Distracting
Healing
Therapeutic
Binding/Bounding
Occupying
Joyful
Exciting
Challenging

For many participants in Art Angel, then, the experience of creativity for mental health was difficult to articulate, but in extended discussions usually entailed a sense of well-being associated with perceptions of a recovering self.

4b) The social effects and impacts of creativity

In thinking through how such creative and artistic experience in itself had important *social* implications for the project participants, it is important to recognise how artists understand their arts practice to be tied to their abilities to relate and communicate themselves with others. For example, experiencing artwork as a stabilising practice was perceived as an important ‘stepping stone’ for reinsertion into wider social relationships and situations outside project spaces. This was linked to the perception that artwork enabled participants to learn about themselves, to experiment with communicating feelings and to work through difficulties that they encountered in other aspects of their everyday lives. A strong sense of art-work as a *relational social practice* and as one that therefore might help participants to achieve or regain a sense of their social abilities in mainstream social spaces beyond Art Angel emerged from artists who previously have had difficulties communicating aspects of themselves, particularly during periods of illness:

‘It’s important to communicate with people, and art, I believe art is about communicating with people. Communicating with yourself as well, it’s a place where you can be read ... and I think that’s why people are often frightened to just put anything down, because suddenly they’ve walked into a place with no rules ...’ (R, project artist).

‘It [art] was another form of communication, because I couldn’t talk very well. Actually I [just] couldn’t talk sometimes and I wasn’t being understood, so I used painting and writing as other forms of trying to communicate with people ... [and so] for me it was vital’ (P, project artist)



While participation in artwork can be beneficial in terms of how it helps facilitate relational social selves (ie, helping artists to enter into a greater diversity of social relations through the development of communication skills), there are other benefits tied to the experience of self-understanding and self-expression, these being important precursors to abilities to communicate and relate. While clearly nebulous and subjective constructs, self-understanding and self-expression are central to identity formation and therefore important in terms of assessing the social impacts of artwork.

In addition to experiencing creativity as and through a therapeutic interior space, artistic practice can also involve self-evaluation in terms of both artistic and personal development:

'I would draw a picture of myself each day. Not from looking in the mirror, but from how I felt ... and I'd learned something from those drawings, learned strongly about how people influence me' (R, project artist)

'It gives you an insight into your own struggle' (A, project artist)

Understanding of both self and illness through artistic work was a dominant theme for many artists in Art Angel, although both staff and project artists noted that working through illness experiences using artwork can gradually be replaced by a development of other artistic

agendas with wider implications for identity and social inclusion (see section 6):

'It's been very helpful, it helps in having a good look at yourself and helping to get rid of the bits you don't like. Because it's such a powerful illness, it's a practical strategy' (N, project artist)

'It's great for the soul and great for who I am and to understand who I am you know? I am constantly re-reading what I have written to find out where I was at a particular time and what I can do now to improve my situation' (A, project artist)

Key to self-understanding for the artists is the notion that the self can be expressed freely and without risk of interpretation in clinical frameworks. Questions of self-identity for people with serious and enduring mental health problems are profound both in terms of perceived and actual recovery, but also in terms of social status and the ability to relate to others. In discussing self-expression as connected to well-being and health, the arts also clearly provided a means through which this might be achieved for Art Angel participants:

'As articulate as I am, when I am ill, or afraid or angry I cannot find words to express myself and I feel frightened [but] ... the creative process, you can see it on the walls here, it helps tell of things that people feel, people with mental health difficulties' (N, project artist)

'We'd be lost without expression, expression for me and the other people that come here is ..., we would be lost without it' (L, project artist)

'I try to represent it, I had to express it. I had to channel my expressive energy and Art Angel gave me the platform to do that' (A, project artist)

Artwork thus combines the building of communication skills, self-understanding and self-expression, all of which were identified by project artists as being important properties in the development of their personal and social identities. The combination of the above also

contributed to feelings of self-confidence, a positive emotional state directly related to the perceived ability to relate, express and understand oneself outside clinical discourses:

'I feel my confidence has been raised up and increased, as the mental health thing knocks your confidence you know' (R, project artist)

'You begin slowly to get a confidence back, just because you're doing something, ... the way you can feel like you are achieving things and progressing' (A, project artist)

The benefits of increased abilities to communicate and express oneself, combined with increased self-confidence led some artists to discuss the beneficial impacts on family life and friendship networks:

'It's had a positive effect on my immediate circle you know, the stone in the water effect. It ripples out, the effects on family' (L, project artist)

'My sister thinks it's good and has seen the change in me' (T, project artist)

'My wife and my son would say I am calmer' (S, project artist)



In summary, the practice of artwork in and of itself in Art Angel has reportedly facilitated important relational skills in its project artists and these can be identified as follows:

Reported positive social effects and impacts of creativity

New, recovered or developed communications skills
Developing self-understanding and insight
Improved self-expression
Feelings of self-confidence
Stable behaviour
Social 'ripple' effect on close friends and family

4c) The difficulties of creative artwork

While project participants were mostly concerned to emphasise the benefits of their participation in the arts through their experience at Art Angel, several discussed the significant challenges and difficulties of engaging in creative work. It is important to acknowledge these difficulties with artwork itself, as these show how project participants recognise, cope with and develop strategies for dealing with challenging situations. The evidence above demonstrates that creative work is a very emotional process involving profound senses of self. Arts work can involve working through difficult emotional and psychological processes that prompt negative or conflictual effects:

'The creative process has been too painful because you're going through the process and you are feeling what you are going through and when you become unwell, you have heightened awareness and that can be painful' (A, project artist)

'There are huge risks ... because I was expressing myself I suppose, taking risks, taking chances' (P, project artist)

Working through these effects can be a profound experience in which self-understanding is achieved but in challenging circumstances. For some artists, the very material processes of art-making also presented challenges when they were feeling ill or having difficulty with the side-effects of medication. Making decisions, using art tools and concentrating were identified as key difficulties in these circumstances:

'I find it quite a battle to be able to keep my mind clear enough, to be able to concentrate' (R, project artist)

'When I first started, it was huge to just choose the colour of paint that I was going to use, I felt really naked in that, I was very fragile' (T, project artist)

Artists were able to identify strategies that they had acquired for overcoming such difficulties including gaining the help of Art Angel staff or other artists in order to jointly persevere with particular endeavours. For others coping with such difficulties over-time had taught them to build in psychological safeguards so that the creative process itself did not cause de-stabilising effects:

'I've got to watch I don't fail, set myself up ... if I don't finish a poem off, or a piece of work, that I don't beat myself up and go into a depression which would happen before ...' (N, project artist)

Developing resilience or at least coping mechanisms that can be put in place to deal with the effects of difficult creative work is one way in which artists measure their own sense of progression:

'This has been one of the major planks in my continuing attempt to adapt to life' (N, project artist)

'There's no question that LUNA in particular takes things a step further and it's for people who have the confidence to, to stand up and perform their work, and want to be published and there's certain aspects of that which are not therapeutic' (P, project artist)

In discussing the range of emotions and psychological states that were evoked when engaging in artistic activity, artists played up the important role of negative emotions, confronting difficulties and meeting challenges through their work. Rather than offer such subjective experiences as evidence as to why the arts *do not* contribute to mental health, the artists realistically convey how coping with such effects are beneficial in building long terms of sustainable versions of recovery and resilience.

Reported difficulties and associated effects of creative arts work

Evocation of negative emotions
Exposure to conflictual psychological processes
Increased perceptions of risk
Challenging physical practices
Building strategies of sustainable resilience
Learning coping mechanisms over-time

Section 5: Experiencing Art Angel and the social dimensions to project participation

5a) The social benefits of project attendance

The daily or weekly attendance at and in art project spaces provides structure, routine and opportunities for expanding social networks for

project participants. While many forms of what might be called ‘day care’ offers such opportunities (Parr, 2000; Philo, Parr and Burns, 2005), there are *particular* features associated with the building of social capital in art project spaces that go beyond the usual dimensions to mental health community-making. In Art Angel, there were opportunities for specific kinds of art-talk, peer-advice giving, friendships, acts of reciprocity, facilitation of workshops and participating in cultural events like exhibitions within and beyond art project space: all of these were dimensions that artists identified as ones that facilitated both self-esteem and a range of positive emotions and that contributed to the social benefits of project participation. Not all participants found the social aspects to the project easy, especially at first entry point to the project. There is also a perception amongst some artists that particular workshops or event-based activities are based on cliques that have developed between certain participants or even between certain staff and participants, which was a deterrent to further involvement. However, these statements were also qualified by those who discussed the gradual ways in which they felt able to participate more fully in group sessions, and to get involved with other projects outside group sessions once a level of confidence and trust had been established with both their peers and project staff.

‘I could see that it was a social project. I think it was that aspect that I found the most difficult, I just wanted to do the art, I didn’t really want to be social initially. I found the social aspect overpowering at the beginning, but it’s good to be challenged ... and I feel comfortable with that now’ (R, project artist)

‘When I first joined I just sat there for 4 to 5 weeks before I did anything, it can be intimidating’ (S, project artist)

‘I believe I’ve been helped by other people’s stories and their art. I believe that’s helped me come back to a balance. So you know, mine could help others too’ (B, project artist)

'Being around other people who understand is hugely important. I can't see that many people want to work by themselves, that want to work in isolation ... most of the people I know thrive on working with other people and want to be involved in that' (P, project artist)

The combination of group sessions and opportunities for more individualised or small group working is a key benefit of Art Angel's organisation, enabling project artists to develop their confidence for different types of participation over time.



All project artists who were interviewed as part of this research hold a strong sense of collective artistic endeavour, in ways that might differ from other projects which encourage more individual ways of working. This sense of collectivity, even amongst artists at very different stages of recovery and well-being, clearly helped to facilitate the building of social bonds and friendship networks amongst participants. Individuals who may have been previously socially isolated because of illness experiences thus have found that Art Angel has engendered a sense of belonging, purpose and mutual care through regular attendance. For those individuals whose attendance has been more sporadic, there was still a sense in which the project would be a welcome social space to which to return after time away.

Reported social benefits of Art Angel project participation

Building daily routine and structure
Increased opportunities for building social capital and friendship
Progressive participation through different activities
Sense of purpose
Peer support-giving and related self-esteem
Specific social skills related to artwork

Project artists used a range of terms to describe the quality of the support and friendship networks that they had built in Art Angel. Key terms here included love, friendship, fellowship, belonging, care and caring, befriending, mattering, cohesion, wholeness, commonality and family. These positive metaphors were used by project participants in order to demonstrate the range of ways in which social capital is experienced emotionally.

5b) Opportunities for the development of artistic and social skills

Participation in Art Angel has enabled instances of learning with possibilities for the development of previously ascribed 'static' (or stigmatised) identities. In explaining this, some artists compared their experience at Art Angel with experiences of artwork in hospital settings. In the case of the former, a sense of choice in the development of artwork, materials and skills helped in the assertion of positive forms of post-hospital or post-clinical self-identification:

'In Liff you would get a palette in front of you, specific colours in front of you, pick up a brush ... you don't get to choose your own colours and here you can do what you want, work with your own colours or whatever ... it's a kind of individual thing in here ... and there's no psychiatrist saying this means that feeling and that kind of crap ... in Liff we would get a set of materials and be told what to do with it, and in here we get a set of choices' (B, project artist)

A crucial point raised above is that artwork is not open to clinical interpretation in community arts project spaces like Art Angel, and so a fundamental difference between these social spaces and older/other institutional sites is emphasised. However, despite advancing a strong sense of the importance of moving on from hospital-based arts experience, working alongside other people with mental health problems that are being creative and working positively for recovery is of value to many:

'We have a special quality together, we all have different illnesses, but the commonality is that we have the illness. We don't celebrate the illness ... and the art itself is an important tool for diverting people talking about their illness' (N, project artist)

For many artists, Art Angel involves a safe space for artistic development in a non-pressurised environment that combines different ways in which to experience art work; either in the form of classes, individual work or collective projects. Artists discussed the development of their artistic and personal identities by charting a progression from a tentative entry to arts projects when engagement with people, art-talk, materials and creative ideas seemed daunting or impossible, to current positions where individual artists may have built up portfolios, be developing new directions, or even advocating for others:

'When I first joined the project, I was just used to go along to the writing group, but then I became more involved in the running of projects and different projects as well. I know how to go from someone sitting, having an idea, because plenty of people do, they think wouldn't that be a great idea for a film, or I'd really like to publish a book, or I'd like to have my music recorded. I know how to go from there to having a film on the screen or having a book that you can hold in your hand and show to someone. I know how to do that ... and that's the main thing that I've learnt...' (P, project artist)

Training is available in Art Angel in relation to specific arts skills relating to visual, photographic, written, performance and film-making mediums and artists valued having a range of opportunities to develop their artistic portfolios. Of particular value is a sense of progressive and incremental training (non or self-assessed) in the context of continuous staff support:

'It takes time to build your confidence, so you have to be consistent. There is a lot of consistency here. Particularly from L and J (staff) who run the art group. They've got a great deal of consistency and encouragement. They create a very peaceful and supportive environment to do art in' (R, project artist)

'I've gained skills that have allowed the artistic and creative side to me to be revealed and developed. It's an art of living if you like and it's challenging because we don't have that level of consistency that comes with stable mental health you know? So it's important not to use formal qualifications in our work, but allow for the wave pattern' (N, project artist)

'You're always learning' (T, project artist)

Several project artists have gained the opportunity to develop their skills in peer-facilitation, taking the lead on workshops, running groups inside and outside the Art Angel project and organise versions of art advocacy. Such experiences are valued in terms of a progressive building of confidence and ability, although almost all artists find such responsibilities challenging and difficult. Art Angel staff have been available to support facilitation and this is evidence of good practice in terms of progressive approaches to skills building:

'I've taken (ran) an art class through Art Angel and it was a really good experience, but tiring and slow. I found it hard to be with people, to facilitate. I'd ask R (staff) to co-facilitate with me so I would be alright if I was over-stretched' (R, project artist)

'It's not just turning up when you feel like it and going along to an art group. If you are involved in making a film or recording a CD, then you have got to be there and be prepared to do things which aren't always fun. It's not for everyone, but the people who are, are folk who want to take things further, who want to really push themselves and see what they can do' (P, project artist)

One of the key ways in which Art Angel was identified as helping to facilitate both personal and artistic development amongst project participants was with respect to moving on from representing illness experiences. A self-assessed measure of artistic development was the attainment of new interests and artistic agendas, a progressive strategy also valued and supported by project staff:

'To begin with most people are looking for a wee bit of catharsis, a wee bit of therapy of whatever ... but as time goes by and people actually become aware of their developing abilities and find skills they didn't know they had, then there is a real hunger in them to get their work out there' (O, project artist)

'It's a vehicle (art) at certain times to write about our problems and it flavours our writing, or painting, it flavours everything, but ... there is an ordinary enjoyment of art that comes in, slowly, but surely, you know, and particularly once you get to trust what is happening ... [that] is being done by us' (N, project artist)

Although artists do discuss both intentional and unintentional working through of self in art work (as outline in Section 4), for many



artists a politics of mental health⁴ as advocated through the arts is not a core concern, although various individual projects and exhibitions may have been orientated towards this in the past. Both project staff and artists argue that, while both a therapeutic use of arts and an artistic politics of mental health can be necessary and effective, it is important to move beyond representations of illness and treatment in order to fulfil artistic development and maximise opportunities for social inclusion beyond project spaces (see Section 6).

Reported dimensions of skills development at Art Angel

Choices in materials, projects and mediums maximise skills opportunities for participants
Skills development in non-clinical contexts are most valued
Progressive, continuous and incremental skills development are evidenced and valued
Developing new artistic agendas assists self-confidence
Co- and peer facilitation builds on social and artistic skills

5c) Difficulties with project participation

While the majority of narratives about participation in Art Angel are positive, there are some more negative aspects that need to be raised. Artists were acutely aware of the precarious funding situation of the project, represented physically and symbolically in the move from the Rep Theatre to Dudhope Arts Centre. The continuing structural instability, and lack of core project funding, impacts negatively on artists who are worried about their ability to be able to access the project in the future. Some artists also find that they need to occasionally buy their own specialist artistic materials if funds are not available, which is clearly an important issue for those on limited incomes or benefits. The need at various points to cut down on

⁴ In this case a politics of mental health references diverse challenges to bio-medical and psychiatric orthodoxies.

workshop sessions and staff time has impacted negatively on the health and well-being of particular participants who rely heavily on Art Angel in terms of their structure and routine:

'It's the breaks between groups when I go down' (B, project artist)

'It's basically saved my life this project, if that's not too strong a point, it gives you a focus on the week. When you're not here, you're thinking what can you do? what can you do on your own? It's important that this project doesn't fold' (T, project artist)

The travel to the new site at Dudhope Art Centre has made access more difficult for some participants and their sense of belonging to the cultural centre of Dundee has been somewhat compromised (see Section 6).

Other concerns that arise for project artists include the perception that some workshops or activities are dominated by more experienced participants or cliques that serve to deter their own development and inclusion. However, continued exposure to the project over-time tended to allay these fears.

Art Angel staff clearly have an important role to play in providing support for project artists. In time of illness or personal difficulty, particular artists can come to rely heavily on their ability to access staff in terms of talking through their problems. A common concern was thus the amount of time and personal pressure that project staff were under in order to cope with these demands. Several artists suggested that the availability of occasional counselling services as part of the project would help in this regard, and lessen the pressure on project staff.

Section 6: Building community lives and identities

An important part of the research project that informs this report is an understanding of how participation in arts projects can help to cement,

rebuild or facilitate particular aspects of community lives for people with serious mental health problems. There are many complexities to the community lives and identities for such people, and engagement with arts activities can only address some of these. However, in light of recent arguments about cultural rights and citizenship (Stevenson, 2001), the ways in which the arts might help facilitate positive senses of self and community identification should be examined.

6a) Cross-community networking

Participation in Art Angel has facilitated social opportunities for peer and cross-community networking. Regular trips to other projects in other places (such as the Western Isles Mental Health Association in the Hebrides) involve communicating and interacting with other artists, mental health organisations and communities. Spending time away from home, usual routines and support networks involve challenges and difficulties, but enable project artists to practice engaging in semi-independent living, working and recreation activities. Filming projects can also often involve travel and engagement with a range of community and mental health organisations. In respect to filming (usually undertaken by LUNA) significant responsibility is taken by project artists for explaining artistic intentions, facilitating, research, planning, filming and following-up with the different people and organisations involved. Many project artists find travel and different types of community and organisational engagement challenging, but also clearly gain from such activity, even discussing the ways in which they find difficulties empowering or learning experiences:

'I was pretty intimidated going to Glasgow and meeting these people I didn't know, but I've done it now and I'll know what to look for next time. ... My definition of empowering would be doing things the way I want to do them, and the way I feel comfortable, but I also know that if I'm going to work with other people that's not going to happen all the time, and that there are things we disagree with, but that's what happens when you work with other people ... it will always involve as much effort as enjoyment' (P, project artist)

6b) The social significance and outcomes of exhibitions

Beyond facilitating new cross-community and peer experiences with other community organisations, Art Angel (and previously Arts Advocacy) has opened up opportunities for project artists to exhibit their work in mainstream community and cultural spaces. This is a major way in which perceptions of artistic identities are built and extended. During the period of research several exhibitions were mounted and films shown in different venues. Project artists emphasised how such material outcomes for their work involved a range of largely positive emotions including pride, self-esteem, sense of achievement and excitement, as well as providing opportunities for collaborative celebration and enjoyment. It should also be recognised that for some artists these events are difficult and pressurising social occasions and involve feelings of risk both in respect to the coping with the event itself as well as the content of the arts work displayed.

The audience for such events is also important for many and project artists acknowledged that these were usually small and drew upon related family, friends and organisational networks (although larger exhibitions can attract a wider public). In terms of community identities, some artists felt that exhibitions had an important role to play in validating their daily activities to others and legitimatising developing artistic identities to friends and family:

'It gives them an insight into what I do and I'm quite proud of that. To let them see that there more to (me) It gives the people we love something tangible other than our behaviour; it gives a validity to things' (N, project artist)

'When I started to write my friends and family were quite concerned for me you know, that I was drifting into being unwell again ... but once I started getting things published and that it was ok, you know CDs, exhibitions, books, then they started to see things differently' (A, project artist)

It is clear from the above quotations how arts activities can be crucial in terms of developing new versions of community identities within existing social networks. For people whose identities may well have been threatened or been experienced as negatively static in relation to illness labels, then such outcomes are profound.



In terms of facilitating a wider sense of place and belonging within the community, exhibition events can be particularly important for groups who have previously felt marginalised due to stigmatising social relations. In discussing past experiences of major exhibition work, project artists emphasised how the arts bring with them the possibility for centring marginalised voices, experiences and locations. When discussing the past ‘Life at Liff’ exhibition in the McManus Galleries, for example, there was a sense of a legitimate and radical re-occupation of mainstream cultural city spaces:

‘One of the most incredible events was the Liff exhibition which was held in the premier public exhibition space in Dundee, and from being in this place regarded with suspicion seven miles out of Dundee, we took it right into the middle of the city and said ‘we are here, this is us’. We are not hiding in the country anymore in a big Victorian building, we are right in the middle of town now. That was an incredible experience, it was one of the largest collections of work by local people in Dundee, an absolutely major collection and I felt hugely part of the city and its history’ (P, project artist)

‘It’s taken us out of Liff and put us slap band in the middle of town and people can see us, we are on the screen and on billboards ... we need to be heard’ (O, project artist)

Such comments emphasise the political potential of arts work and the role of arts advocacy for this group. However, for some artists it was important to emphasise their experience of the arts as a therapeutic and social process rather than being concerned about working for public acceptance, or demonstrating artistic competence.

6c) Connecting with cultural and artistic communities

In terms of forging a distinctive presence in the cultural geographies of Dundee, Art Angel has clearly had mixed fortunes, relating partly to its moving from the prestigious location of the Rep Theatre (as Arts Advocacy) to the more marginal city centre location in Dudhope Arts Centre. This has had both practical and symbolic implications for the project artists and their sense of place within local artistic networks. Some artists feel that Art Angel has lost its distinctive profile and they recall the both the sense of excitement and associated social status in physically accessing the Rep Theatre in the cultural quarter of the city. For others, the cultural quarter of the city presented challenges and previous physical access to project staff was difficult and intimidating. The new venue brings, then, a sense of belonging and ownership as well as a new collective artistic working space.

Project artists have mixed feelings about liaising with established and professional arts venues and artists. Some take significant responsibility for networking with organisations like the DCA for the exhibition and showing of work, although this is acknowledged to be challenging. The sheer range of work in a variety of formats has required that project artists liaise with community publishers, editors and so on in ways that expand their experience and expertise. Art Angel facilitators and occasional staff (such as film editors) are themselves professional artists and so engagement with the project itself ensures contact and networking opportunities in this respect. Over the research period for this study, there was little evidence that established writers, visual artists and film-makers, beyond those paid

by the project, were in contact with the group, although such workshops and meetings have been organised in the past. For some artists there is also a sense of frustration that a lack of adequate financial support from city, social and medical services has limited the opportunities to build further networks with professional artistic communities. Partly as a result of these factors, the development of artistic identities are mediated, and for some artistic judgement in professional and public arts venues and exhibitions beyond the project also carry risk:

'I use art all the time, but I'm still not convinced I'm an artist' (P, project artist)

'There's a lot of protection here, but to go beyond that, and the recognition of mental health problems, hurts ... to go into public, a public art place ...' (R, project artist)

Reported outcomes of project participation for community lives and identities

Art Angel involves opportunities for cross-community interaction and travel

Arts exhibitions and products facilitate self-esteem, enhanced community status and skills development

Arts exhibitions can involve senses of risk and challenge

Arts exhibitions can facilitate a sense of place

Interactions with artistic and cultural communities involve positive and negative associations

Art Angel could be further embedded in the local cultural and artistic context

Section 7: The future, moving on and recovery

Community mental health services and community arts project are often under pressure to demonstrate 'through-put' of clients. This demand relies, however, on a very particular understanding of the meaning of 'moving on' and this research documents multiple dimensions to this term.

Certain project artists do have a very literal sense of ‘moving on’ in that they have (now) left the project⁵ or have engaged in new and different community activities (such as co-facilitating community writing groups, taking up paid and unpaid positions in the wider voluntary sector) as a direct or in-direct result of their participation in Art Angel and the building of self-confidence, skills and self-esteem:

‘I’m firming up mentally, I can feel the changes, I’m on a ‘moving forward’ course now, going towards work. ... I’ve been able to come out of the isolation’ (R, project artist)

‘There’s lots of spin-offs from the arts as it helps to rebuild your capacities’ (N, project artist)

‘I’m now a reporter with Little Wing, and I’ve joined another writer’s group called ‘Hilltown’s Horizons’. I’ve moved on, I’ve not needed the project so much because I’ve moved on, but I still get involved with LUNA and I think it’s important that the group is still there for me’ (A, project artist)

‘I facilitate a photography group at the Whitfield community centre’ (B, project artist)

There is clearly evidence that participation in Art Angel facilitates ‘moving on’ in terms of community engagement (and forms of cultural citizenship) for project artists interviewed, as they have engaged in:

- Facilitating projects and workshops within Art Angel
- Facilitating community (non-mental health related) arts workshops
- Participation in training-for-work courses
- Taken on new positions and responsibilities in other voluntary sector groups
- Participation in college courses
- Activities with media and other arts organisations
- Returning to paid work

⁵ 2 interviewees had left the project since first interview, but were still in contact and contributed to key events.

However, it should also be noted that ‘moving on’ can have other meanings. For example, project participants predominantly understand the benefits they have gained from Art Angel as strategies for recovery and well-being that are to be implemented over a long time period. The cultivation of self understanding, self-esteem and well-being through the arts takes a significant amount of time as individuals work through different social and psychological issues (as in Section 4), and ‘moving on’ from illness and isolated social positions should be valued as much as more literal indicators of progression (such as transferral to other projects or job opportunities). For the project artists who were interviewed for this research project, there are mixed understanding of the meaning of ‘moving on’, and while for some, not much appeared to have (materially) changed over the period of one year, for example, they did have a sense in which their life and skills experience was developing in positive ways through their association with the project. There are opportunities within Art Angel itself for the progression of personal identities and skills associated with increased responsibility in relations to artwork:

‘I can move on and still be here, I just change the job description if you like’ (B, project artist)

I get a buzz out of helping other people, watching them come on. It’s time for me to give something back’ (T, project artist)

This usually involved ways in which experienced project artists can assist newer participants to develop their work and also engage in arts advocacy. Within the remit of Art Angel such movement involves important progression in terms of self-esteem, status and skills experience.

Despite evidence that there are different kinds of ‘moving on’ within Art Angel and for participants, it should also be acknowledged that for some people who are profoundly affected by their mental

health problems that conventional understandings of appropriate progression are unrealistic and that more flexible measures of progress need to be developed and recognised by external agencies.

Finally, in terms of contemplating a future it was notable that project artists had a range of things to say about their personal and professional development in association with their attendance at Art Angel. For some artists, they viewed their future in terms of an unpredictable patterning of wellness and illness in which Art Angel will nonetheless provide a stabilising point of focus. For others, however, they had distinctive artistic ambitions for developing new skills, putting on particular exhibitions and getting involved in new projects. In striking contrast to remembered (non or vague) expectations at the point of project entry, artists now (at the point of interview) have a range of ambitions which is testament to the ways in which the organisation has helped to build capacity in their social and artistic development.

Section 8: Summary and conclusion

In summary participation in Art Angel has had a range of largely positive impacts on the people with mental health problems that use the project. Using evidence from their narrated experiences these can be summarised as follows:

The experience of arts for mental health is reported to have facilitated

- Increased self-understanding
- Prompted self esteem
- Facilitated self-directed therapeutic processes
- Opportunities for self-evaluation
- Feelings of stability
- Positive ‘ripple effects’ to friends and family

- Improved communications skills
- Involved challenges and difficulties
- Increased senses of resilience

The experience of Art Angel project participation is reported to have facilitated:

- Structure and regular routines
- Social and emotional capital
- Progressive participation in a range of activities
- Incremental skills development
- Training opportunities
- Learning opportunities
- Fears about sustainable funding and associated social support
- Artistic development

The experience of community lives beyond (but related to) the Art Angel project is reported to have involved

- Cross-community networking
- Opportunities for travel, research, planning and managing projects
- Exhibiting in mainstream cultural venues
- Building different community identities and status
- Building different senses of place and belonging in community and cultural networks
- Partial self-identification as artists

The experience of visioning a future within and beyond Art Angel is reported to have involved:

- Moving on to other projects and community roles
- Returning to paid work
- Engaging in educational and work training activities
- Taking on new responsibilities and roles within the organisation

- Creating distance from previously isolated social positions
- Creating new artistic agendas

There are profound challenges for Art Angel in terms of its management, sustainable income and planning for the future, but in terms of the reported benefits of project artists, then the organisation can be seen to be facilitating important changes and benefits that are orientated around both social and artistic development, and clearly link with multi-agency agendas for social inclusion.

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