

# Witness Writer

Sarah Searson

One Artist's account of the  
Regional *Dialogue* Sessions

Text developed for the  
National | *Dialogue Arts + Health*

RUA RED, Tallaght, Dublin

Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> December 2011

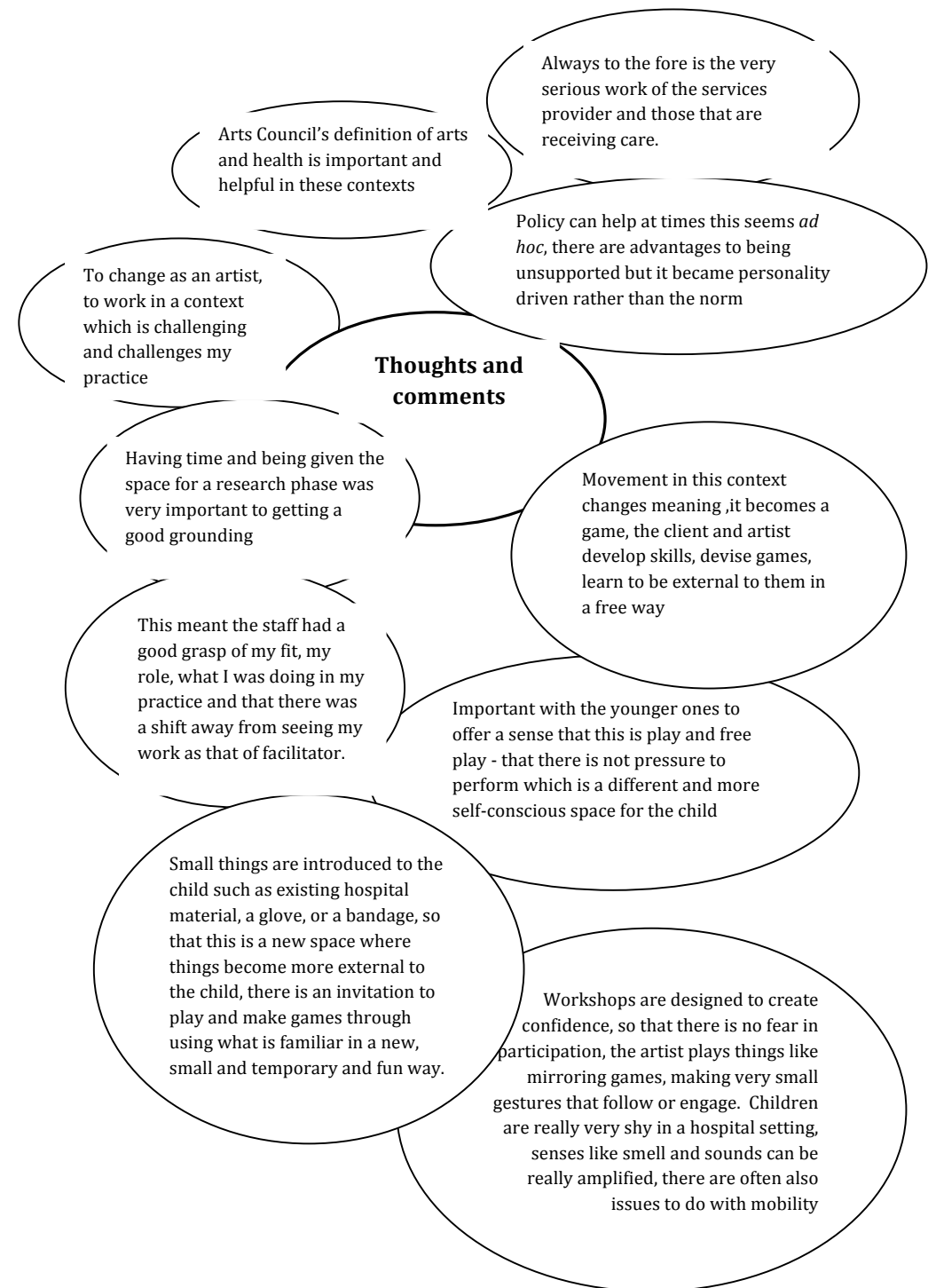
## About the Writer

Sarah Searson is a curator and writer. Her career has been focused on managing and developing arts projects and programmes in Ireland. [www.sarahsearson.com](http://www.sarahsearson.com)

## About the Event

National | *Dialogue Arts + Health* was a one-day event which aimed to explore shared outlooks for arts and health practice in Ireland. The event was the culmination of twelve regional professional development events for artists, which took place in Cavan, Offaly, Galway and Limerick between September and November 2011. *Dialogue Arts + Health* was developed by the Arts + Health Coordinators Ireland (AHCi) in partnership with the Association of Local Authority Arts Officers (ALA:AO). It was funded by the Arts Council of Ireland and supported by numerous regional partners.

For more information about the overall *Dialogue Arts + Health* project please see <http://dialogueartsandhealth.wordpress.com/>



As witness to three *Dialogue Sessions*, one in Cavan and two in Offaly, I brought the perspective of a policy maker and curator with a visual art background. In particular I was drawn to experiential concerns, practice approaches and conclusion of artists who have focused their production and engagement within a range of healthcare contexts.

I found my peers to be interested in what might seem obvious in this context, but also that which is highly complex; people, their emotional and physical wellbeing. The shift of identity and perception that takes place in healthcare environments is relevant to all whom meet within such spaces. It is a defined structure, where process underpins the work of care. Navigating a space for art-making, and arts' role within in this sector is an achievement when there is little space for a more unusual configuration. Some presentations made by artists illustrate how highly skilled they are. They are capable of identifying their support needs, are strong communicators and skilled negotiators, rather than being in addition to their art-making is as result of it. Experience, deep consideration of context and practice potentials was at the core of the work. And this was really interesting.

Some artists directly or indirectly expressed an interest in identities of place and the heritage and cultures of institutional care, and concern for cultural context underpinned artwork in ways that might not have been overt. The skills needed to engage with people directly and indirectly is challenged and shaped within these contexts. Work appeared stronger where time, research and engagement underpinned its expression. This it seems to me made for clarity in relationships, better potential for exchange and artwork.

Most notably there was a generosity in the sharing of experience, perspectives and concerns, and a spirit of collegiate respect. What was exchanged and listened to by peers was the experience of practice. Our focus was on developing ways of accessing the complex nature and constituent communities of health-care environments. I have clustered the ideas, points, concerns, findings and thoughts from my time with the groups into mind-maps which I hope will capture the sense of energy present over these exchanges. Thank you for inviting me to listen.

