

SYNAESTHESIA

A joint visual art and music participatory programme
in a mental health setting



EXPLORATORY DOCUMENT

Joanna Cunningham
July 2013

List of contents

Introduction	3
Background	3
Method	4
Summary of learning	5
The integration of two art forms	5
The creative collaboration	6
The debriefings	7
Summary	8
Appendices	9

Introduction

Synaesthesia is a participatory visual art and music project, which was delivered in 2013, for clients of the Activation Therapy Unit (ATU), St. Otteran's Mental Health Hospital, Waterford.

This document is not an evaluation of the participants' experience of the *Synaesthesia* project rather it is an exploratory document which teases out some of the conditions needed for a multi-disciplinary collaborative approach to art making in a mental health setting.

Background

Following on from a successful pilot of visual art workshops for clients of the ATU in 2012 and a programme of participatory music workshops which have been ongoing in the unit since 2008, the Waterford Healing Arts Trust (WHAT) developed a series of joint visual art and music workshops for ATU clients. This joint visual art and music programme grew from a need identified by WHAT to expand the possibilities of the art forms through collaboration between WHAT artists and musicians in a participatory context, thus creating new arts experiences for the participants.

In mental health settings, motivating individuals to become involved in social activities can be difficult. The strategy document for the future development of the Irish Mental Health services "A Vision for Change" (Government publications 2006, page 9) recommends the provision of "a comprehensive range of medical, psychological and social therapies, relevant to the needs of service users and their families." Arts activities, with an emphasis on participation and inclusion, have much to offer as a social therapy, in the provision of quality holistic mental health care.¹ This programme aims to exercise the proven positive influence of art and music in motivating participants.

The original aims of the programme were:

- To motivate participants through engagement in an activity
- To encourage/promote greater social interaction
- To encourage individual creative development and decision making
- To foster a sense of achievement for participants
- To explore the creative and social potential of music and art cross art form
- To investigate the professional development of artists via cross art form collaboration
- To produce a 'legacy' book or document which represents the work done by the group and which can be used as a guide for mental health professionals who wish to deliver work of this kind in the mental health setting

¹ *Crossing the Line, An Evaluation of a Musician in Residence programme in Mental Health settings, Waterford City*, O'Shanahan, K. & Grehan, M. , 2009

Method

Subsequent to receiving funding from the National Lottery to deliver this project, WHAT invited joint proposals from musicians and artists to deliver a visual art and music programme. Based on their proposal artists Philip Cullen and Jill Bouchier were selected to deliver a programme entitled *Synaesthesia* in 2013.

The programme of 8 music and art workshops was run over an 8 week period. These workshops were followed by a 30 minute debriefing exercise with the WHAT Acting Assistant Arts Director, Joanna Cunningham, from which information was gathered about the findings of the sessions and this then influenced the evolution of the programme. This information was recorded with the express purpose of developing a 'legacy' document which aimed to support non-artists and musicians to deliver work of this kind and this setting independently. Collecting this information also aimed to add to the body of learning about arts and health practice with particular reference to the experimental nature of the joint arts idea.

Workshops were delivered to a group of 10 - 15 participants from the ATU who represented a broad spectrum of support needs. Referral or 'selection' criteria included

- willingness to attend and interest in participation in the project
- identification of candidates by medical staff based on their needs and the programme aims outlined

The overall programme goal was 2 pronged:

1. To maximize contact time between artist and musician with ATU group based on budget available. Due to the experimental nature of the joint arts format, the workshops were planned in advance by the artist and musician but were executed with the group in a flexible and exploratory way. This meant that while the necessary workshop predictability and structure was in place, there was scope for development of themes and avenues arising out of the organic unfolding of the work. This approach aimed to foster creativity and freedom and to explore creative ideas while providing a safe framework in which participants would experience containment.
2. To record the structure and outcomes of each workshop in a 30 minute (approx) debriefing exercise. These debriefings were attended by artist, musician and the WHAT Acting Assistant Arts Director. The information recorded was used to assess the elements of the workshops and the concepts that worked, as well as those that did not. In the original aims it was planned that this information would be filtered into a format that could then be used as an outline or guide for ATU and other mental health professionals who wish to deliver this kind of work

themselves in the absence of an artist or musician. The goal was to record information collected over 8 sessions and compile it in a handbook which would represent the work done provide a step-by-step guide on how to deliver on-going work of this kind.

As the programme was delivered the format was adhered to strictly. Sessions were held for an hour each week and debriefings following each session between the artist, musician and WHAT Acting Assistant Arts Director took place.

Summary of learning

The WHAT Acting Assistant Arts Director guided a process of reflection on each session in which the following headings were used:

- Practicalities – how was the session structured and planned?
- Willingness to participate – did group members need a lot of encouragement to come along and then to become involved in the session?
- To what degree did group members become engaged in the work?
- What worked?
- What did not work?

It emerged following the early debriefings that there were three areas of on-going particular interest. They were:

- The **integration of two art forms** in the facilitation of an arts and mental healthcare setting workshop series
- The **creative collaboration** between a facilitating artist and musician in the delivery of these workshops
- The role and importance of the **debriefing** process as an integral part of the creative unfolding of this work

In this exploratory document these three areas are used as a framework for understanding what came out of this process as important learning in the evolving field of arts and health practice.

The integration of two art forms

The original vision of this programme was to offer people in a mental health care setting the opportunity to participate in an experimental collaborative visual art and music experience. The method of delivering a series of workshops in which these art forms would be delivered side by side or in an integrated, collaborative way was process-focussed and aimed to foster a sense of expressive freedom during which participants would not be bound by concerns about visual art or musical outcomes.

In session 1, to introduce the idea of making art and music in an integrated way, the facilitators guided an exercise of using pencils as instruments on paper 'drums' to mirror rhythms that were being played on simple percussion

instruments. Here the pointed and scattered marks of the pencil drumming showed the group that the importance was being placed on the act of making the marks and the interesting relationship between the visual, audio and the physical relationship between the two. The process of allowing themselves to focus on the space where the visual art and music met allowed the group to be drawn away from restrictive concerns about the quality of their visual art and musical creations.

In time this idea developed using charcoal and working with tone. 'Tone' is a concept that transcends the two art forms and supported consideration about the contrast of light and dark and the numerous shades in between. Alongside, the music or sounds produced grew from loud to soft; different pitches or low and high notes reflected the contrasts in the tones of the charcoal markings.

The group found the charcoal to be an unfamiliar medium and expressed interest in it as a new tactile experience. To support this exploration, the musician opted to support the group by playing a strong repetitive rhythm on the djembe. He felt that this would provide 'containment' or an anchor for free playing and use of the new art material.

Artist and musician moved through the elements of their art forms and explored the cross over where the wash of water colour on a page was mirrored by the ascending and descending glissandi on the xylophone or the plink plonk of the tuned pentatonic desk bells which facilitated the childlike reminiscing about childhood homes and the tentative creation of these images.

The facilitators of this programme noted that there was little communication between the group members who appeared immersed in the experience of sound, making the translation of this into something visual and back again.

The creative collaboration

The collaborative relationship between the two facilitating artists was essential to its success. It can often be the case that personalities clash and prevent a creative partnership from flourishing, therefore potentially blocking or impeding creative involvement by group members.

In the case of this joint visual art and music project, the artist and musician reported that their experience of their working relationship was mutually respectful and that their working ethos' were similar. The collaboration between the artist and musician mirrored the meeting point and integration between the two art forms. It was essential that this was a peaceful process as opposed to a tense competitive strain to be the dominant force.

As the weeks progressed, the artist and musician built on the positive elements of their working relationship and it became clear that this itself was central to the nuances and sensitivities at the core of the link between their goals and the uptake or participation by the group members.

Both facilitators worked in a sensitive, nurturing way but were also keen to balance enough guidance with enough freedom. Both had a gentle communication style which seemed to incentivise and encourage participation. Attendance throughout the project was high indicating that the sessions were popular amongst the client group (the ATU follows an approach in which the client decides which activities they wish to participate in so a high attendance rate points to the likelihood that group members experienced the sessions to be warm, welcoming, non-judgemental and a place to which they wanted to go). See Appendix II for a selection of participants' comments on this programme.

The facilitators often commented in the debriefing about how gratifying it was that their working relationship was so positive. They referred to the ease of communication and the sense of mutual acceptance and respect that they were both experiencing. Both were aware of the potential for this not to be the case. While professionalism is always expected in any working relationship, it is not always the case that there is a natural ease between work colleagues. Due to the sensitive and unique nature of working in the areas of the arts and in mental healthcare settings an absence of this ease or natural 'fit' could impact negativity on the flow of the work and despite best efforts could interrupt the creative 'opening up' of the group members. The facilitators of this work noticed very early on that their working relationship was positive and easy and they opted to focus on this as a means of enhancing the experience of the group members. They considered their interactions to be at the core of and to mirror the flow between the two arts media.

The debriefings

Each week the facilitators met with the WHAT Acting Assistant Arts Director and the various elements of the weekly sessions were explored. Originally it was envisaged that as a means of sustaining the benefits of this work, a booklet or set of guidelines could be written based on the learning from these debriefings. However, it soon became clear that the unique nature of the delivery of this kind of work went far beyond basic guidance for art and music making. In the process of this discovery, analytic thinking about the reasons for how sessions unfolded and how group members responded to suggestions as well as how the debriefings themselves influenced the development of artistic ideas became central to the artistic and developmental experience of the artist and musician. It was during these conversations that the artist and musician found that much of their learning took place.

Both identified that an objective third voice shone light in areas that swayed creative decisions and ideas. Both also stated that discussing the work in this way gave it a meaning and value that might have been lost if sessions were simply conducted and not assessed or reflected upon after their completion.

In previous work experiences, both facilitators often questioned the meaning of their work and their identities as artists. While this project did not resolve this uncertainty, both felt that the post-session discussions clarified the

purpose of their work and allowed them to consider the place of their presence in the lives and experiences of the group members. Facilitators described how in previous work they processed the issues that arose in the course of their interactions with group members internally. Both expressed satisfaction that externalising this voice and involving it in a dialogue or interchange helped with the development of ideas and with the understanding of complex issues that arise inevitably in the course of this kind of group work.

Summary

In the original aims and objectives it was envisaged that a set of guidelines could be developed drawing on the skills of the artist and musician so that elements of these skills could be exercised by staff who engage clients of mental healthcare settings in activities on a day to day basis. This document outlines the journey and exploration of the joints arts and music as well as the creative collaboration process by the pair. Through exploration of this it is clear that the particular skill of the artist and/or musician is itself at the core of the success of this kind of creative process. For this reason it became clear that these skills cannot necessarily be passed on using practical guidelines. The inherent understanding of the creative process by the artist or musician is the hook for the consistent creative participation of the client. The question arose as to whether a non-artist or musician might be able to offer this hook as well as the particular support necessary for the creative exploration that arises thereafter.

This exploratory document highlights the conditions needed for this multi-disciplinary collaborative approach. It identifies that:

- discussing the work through debriefings gives it a meaning and value that might be lost if sessions are simply conducted and not assessed or reflected upon after their completion.
- debriefings allow for the development of ideas and the understanding of complex issues that arise inevitably in the course of this kind of group work
- an objective third voice at the debriefings shines light in areas that sway creative decisions and ideas.
- it is essential that the working relationship of the artists is mutually respectful
- the inherent understanding of the creative process by the artists is the hook for the consistent creative participation of the client.

Appendix I

Artist biographies

Philip Cullen

Philip Cullen is an artist and participatory arts facilitator living in a renovated haybarn in rural Kilkenny. He graduated from the Crawford College of Art and Design in the early nineties. He works as a freelance facilitator working with a variety of groups including Travellers, disabled people, men and women's groups, people with mental illness, young offenders, refugees, children, the elderly and adults in night classes.

Since 2008, Philip has worked with patients in the Oncology and Renal Dialysis wards in Waterford Regional Hospital supporting them to create art including drawing, creative writing and digital photography as part of the Waterford Healing Arts Trust (WHAT) arts programme.

Philip has been involved in many solo and group exhibitions and has been commissioned to make sculptures by public and private bodies

Jill Bouchier

Jill Bouchier is a Waterford-based artist and teacher. She graduated with an MA in European Fine Art from Winchester School of Art and a BA Honours Degree in Painting from Chelsea School of Art, UK.

Jill works primarily in the local community facilitating and teaching art workshops to a variety of groups and organisations. She exhibits her work on a regular basis and has curated exhibitions from the Waterford City Municipal Art Collection and the Arts Council Collection.

Appendix II

This document is not an evaluation of the participants' experience in the *Synaesthesia* project rather it is an exploratory document which teases out some of the conditions needed for a multi-disciplinary collaborative approach to art making in a mental health setting.

The following is a selection of comments made by the *Synaesthesia* participants about the programme:

- *“Enjoyed the music. The guitar was lovely and liked listening. I had a good time painting, filling the whole page with colour.”*
- *“Happy doing it today. Felt it was the same.”*
- *“Liked music and art. Enjoyed the drawing.”*
- *“I felt happy about it, the art and music. The same as last week.”*
- *“I found it enthralling, exciting, blending and merging the colours and music. Expressed motivation and insinuation. It was therapeutic and I enjoyed doing things together. It was a liberal session.”*
- *“I like drawing with different colours. I drew houses and wanted to draw something cheerful. I had a great time, a lot of fun.”*
- *“It was entertaining and interesting. I was pleased with myself”*
- *“I was happy merging colours with the art. The sounds and art, there was such a synthesis between the two, a joining together.”*
- *“I loved the art and liked drawing the circle of the face. I'd been thinking about what drawing to do before coming in. Also liked the rhythm of the guitar.”*
- *“I enjoyed the loud drum and making a noise on it, as don't get the chance to do this. Also liked the green paint and enjoyed the company.”*
- *“I enjoyed it and was delighted when I painted the sheet blue. I liked the rhythm.”*