



The Unwritten Diary

Jake Simpson - Report on the Exhibition February 2015

The Unwritten Diary - A Postscript

In February 2015 I curated an exhibition of art featuring the work of three young artists. The concept arose from my personal circumstances. In seeking a means to understand the issues that had arisen in my life I came to use art as both a tool of description and of expression. I entitled my collection of work The Unwritten Diary and it formed a major part of my course work on a fine art degree course.

A consequence of my studies brought me to examine art as therapy and through this I met Mackie. I met Caroline as a colleague on the course. It gradually dawned on me that what had made a positive difference in my life could, if a suitable vehicle could be found, make an equal contribution to the lives of others like me. It also occurred to me that if that vehicle could engage with others for whom the words 'learning difficulties' were just a label there might be a wider benefit to be obtained.

I explained my thinking to Caroline and Mackie and they agreed to contribute work to the exhibition. The purpose of the exhibition was explained to visitors in the following statement:

'The experience of young people exhibited through visual and verbal responses to the world around them.

The exhibition explores the world through the experiences of people who may possess unusual perceptions of it and their relations with it. The artists exhibiting here are young and have learning difficulties. Both conditions form different life perspectives and tend to create communication difficulties with others.

Caroline and Jake are dyslexic, Mackie has ADHD. They have used their art as a means of understanding themselves and their experiences and also as a means of communication to others. Mackie uses art as therapy to enable him to focus on tasks and to contribute to wider society.

The work being exhibited is intended to reach out to a wide audience and provide them with perspectives they might never otherwise consider. It is hoped that this will stimulate consideration and discussion and, perhaps, bring about engagement with the issues and opinions that are covered by the exhibits.

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." Maya Angelou'

Jake Simpson March 2015

The Unwritten Diary - A Summary

The intention was to speak from personal experience on how the conditions of dyslexia and ADHD compound the problems of transition from child to adult. Life experience is denied or curtailed either by an incapacity to engage or, more often, by the application of a negative stereotype by others. Coping mechanisms are found by chance, I was not diagnosed as severely dyslexic until I was 19. Official strategies and resources do exist to deal with such circumstances but they rely upon an individual working within the system recognising that a problem exists.

Many families experience disharmony. Mine did, but the means of defining and explaining the consequences even to myself were internal, they were felt but not easily communicable. As a result relationships can founder, a jaundiced view can arise, first of family and then of society.

Art is not word dependent. Art utilises different neural pathways from vocal and written communication. Art therapy can help an individual in social interaction, in thought organisation. The concept for the exhibition was to facilitate artistic personal expression.

Deliberately, none of the works displayed were marked for sale because failure to sell could damage the primary goal of encouraging communication. It also meant that a wider audience demographic could be attracted if there was no financial expectation of them, even if only by implication. The cost of attending was engagement with the issues. The profit was to be found in the boost to artists' self esteem and changes in the audience's attitudes to dyslexia and ADHD. To measure success the audience were given the opportunity to express opinions on a plinth.

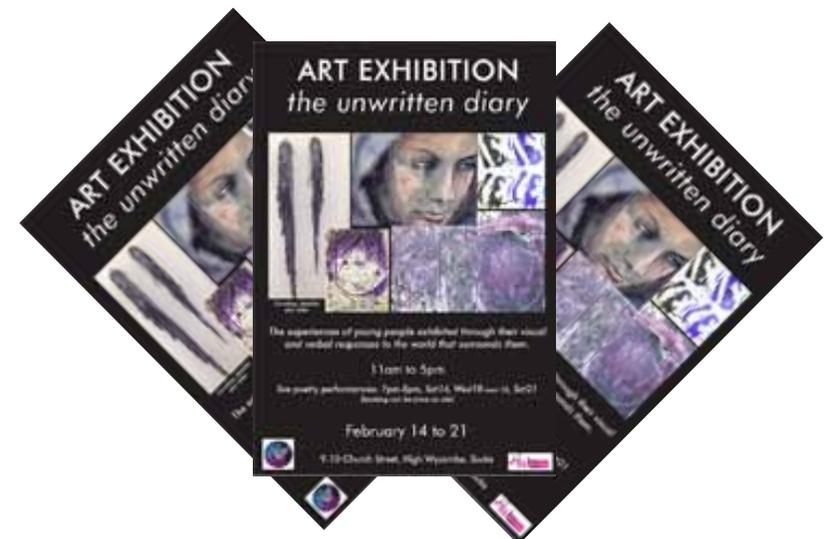
I am happy that my first curatorial adventure was a success when assessed against the goals set for it. The following are demonstrable results:

There was an increase in voluntary communication throughout the event.

The audience demographic was much wider than expected.

The audience expressed a need for art to reach into 'their' part of society.

There was an expressed empathy for the conditions of Dyslexia and ADHD



The Unwritten Diary - Art on the front line

The following pages are an anecdotal expression of my experience of the event, some were recorded during the event and some after.



The exhibition has been an interesting journey of emotions and interactions between the general public and myself as an artist and with the art and the general public. The exhibition was intended to display feelings and emotions with regard to issues in youth culture. This includes growing up with learning difficulties, social and home life difficulties i.e. absent fathers. I believe these ideas and feelings were successfully communicated to the general public and I feel they developed a real relationship to the subject matter.

Some of the things I am going to discuss through this piece are the memorable interactions and experiences with particular people, my ideas as to the demographics, surrounding the exhibition. I will also include how it felt as an artist to curate an exhibition for the general public.



The Unwritten Diary - The Plinth

A primary goal for the exhibition was to facilitate communication, not just from the artists to their public but also in the other direction. The plinth was central to this idea, it provided an additional way for visitors to express their thoughts about the exhibition. It was a great success.

The comments placed on the plinth covered a wide variety of topics. The lack of an art venue was commented on and the use of empty town centre properties was praised.

"Well done! Great Venue! Keep Going!"

"Nice to see empty town space used creatively."

"Very impressive - the Tate Modern in High Wycombe."

The personal ego boost is gratifying but more importantly I think there is an implied demand for a permanent art venue in these comments.

Not all the comments were upbeat some indicated that the issues raised by the exhibits were more widely experienced.

"You get born - Keep your head down - Then you die. If your lucky."

"Seeing this art is like living in limbo. Its a bitter sweet experience."

To balance this some of the comments demonstrated optimism.

"You can do anything - be anything."

"Stay alive through art and culture."

Some visitors took motivation from the exhibition.

"I need 2 get off my arse and do some art #ffs."

On the basis of the plinth comments and what was said I am left with a number of seemingly contradictory thoughts. These will need further investigation but at the moment it would appear that:

An untapped audience for art exists.

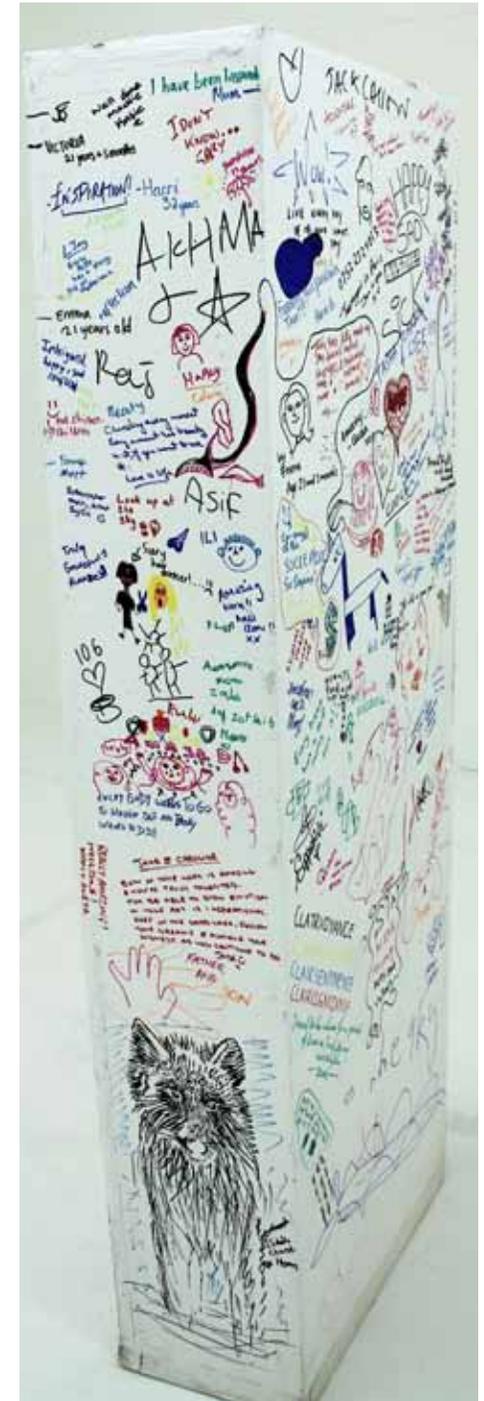
That audience feels somewhat intimidated by their perceptions of how 'art' is presented.

The issues raised are seen as important but beyond the scope of an individual to deal with.

There are hints that a substantial section of the audience see themselves as an alternate society.

Conversely art is seen as a harmonising element in society.

There's food for thought here.



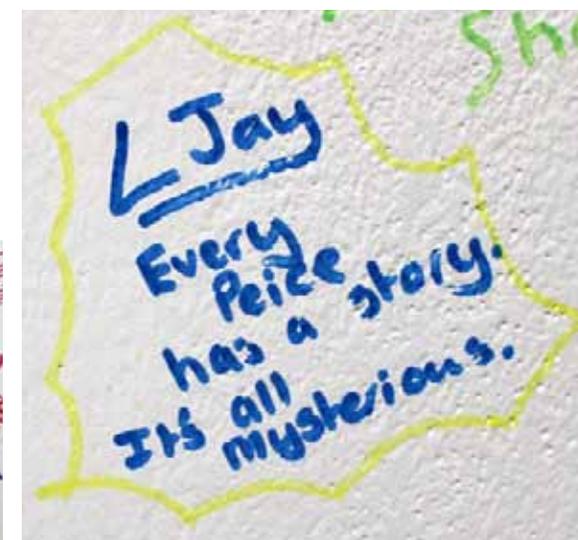
The Unwritten Diary - Art on the front line

We also had a lovely young girl aged about 7 with her grandmother who wrote I'm glad stuff like this exists which was another beautiful moment. As was two 13 year old white boys who came in on their own and spent time taking in all the art and said the art was mysterious and every piece had a story.

Another rewarding experience was when EYS (pupil referral) unit brought in all their learners and some of their comments were interesting and real "everybody want to go to haven but nobody wants to die"

It was empowering to see these children getting involved and asking questions about the work on display and art in general. I really felt they related to and understood my struggles which gave them the courage to approach me and ask questions. Art is generally regarded as a province of the establishment. Many of the children actively avoid contact with the establishment which they regard alien to them.

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The Unwritten Diary - Art on the front line

I really wanted to encourage young people to interact with Fine Art which this project did have real success and I even had some young girls do some fantastic drawings on the feelings plinth to show their talent and get some positive feedback.

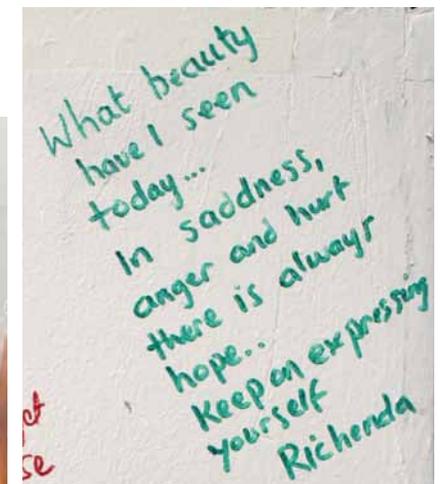
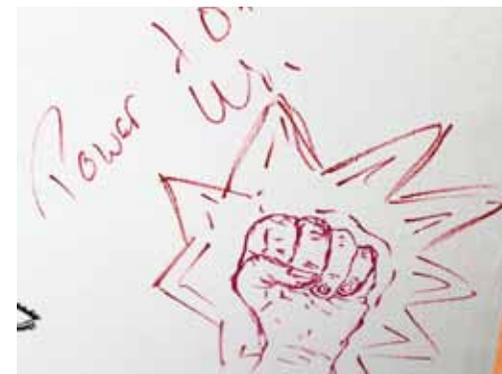
Those were a few of the experiences with young people that showed me art is important and fits any age or gender. However not only children had great responses the adults got heavily involved also. The first person to enter the exhibition was full of positivity and love. She was a youth worker and expressed the importance of art in the community she said art makes you feel things good or bad.

Also a Father and son came in and also gave great feedback and produced a great sketch showing an idea of unity, family and love.

The exhibition had a range of responses from adults all positive however a few standout moments. Firstly we had an architectural student who produced a powerful sketch in response to the exhibition.

We also had a lady who was an art therapist who suffered with learning difficulties herself who saw herself in the work and put normal people scare me. We also had 9 different adults who said it was brilliant to see some arts and culture in High Wycombe and this community and town need more of it!

Lastly we had another beautiful experience where a lady was brought to tears by the work presented because she could feel the pain she had speaking difficulties and said she really needed art therapy and asked if I could facilitate which I couldn't however I managed to give her a number for possible help, again an experience which went on over night.



The Unwritten Diary - In Mackie's Shoes

Lastly I was most proud of my artist Mackie 16 he showed courage in the face of adversity because late last year he wasn't allowed to carry on with his Btec level 1 in Art because he had no artistic background this was after attending the course for a week so it had severely dented his confidence. However he really showed grace in the private view, he was brave he spoke to a few people regarding his work, he showed commitment by staying for the required time. He showed respect by complimenting the other artists involved but lastly he showed gratitude by saying thank you to me for including him and helping him with his art.

That for me showed the potential for the man he could become and he should be proud. I saw development over just a few days. Initially he brought one friend in to look at his work, then he brought 16 teenagers in. Some were more interested than others but they showed him support and they respected the exhibition and its aims. They are boys from disadvantaged areas who at first glance appear to meet the stereotypical criteria of a gang. They all rode BMX bikes wore hoodies and street attire, but again showed respect for the event, support for their friend and conducted themselves with civility. Another unforgettable experience that holds potential for building relationships and social responsibility.

I have spent a lot of time with Mackie, we've talked a lot. He lives for his art, it gives him focus and purpose, it allows him a productive outlet. A week after starting a Btec level 1 art course he was rejected from the course. He accepted the knockback as he had accepted all the others in his life.



It made me angry so I wrote the script for a performance describing what Mackie had told me and how it made him feel. It seemed so relevant to the ideals of the exhibition I placed a copy on display, for once, in its raw, original, unedited form.

The Unwritten Diary - In Mackie's Shoes

How does it feel to be an ackrenim , when half the people don't know the facts within, these four walls feel like there closing in , Personally , this is all hurting me , but no1 seems to see it , and im angry , im scared , ive been expelled so many times sometimes I feel like im losing my mind, im losing focus all the time , ive been sent away for help ... im helpless , I need to help myself , control myself , ive been put on medication , for stability but it doesn't seem to be healing me . people don't realise how hard it is , when your bodies moving and ur mind keeps wandering. And every second your just trying to remain in control , but I guess this is what lifes like when you're an ackrimnem . getting angry and slapping him because everyone looks at you differently because you aint the same , it's a shame because im only trying to progress with no stress , try and get of tablets, i don't want to be addicated , i want to be free , i want to be myself, with no help !!! I want to be surrounded by people who believe in me It was never going to be easy never going to be easy , ive pushed many ppl away and only a few have come back there the people who keep me on track im trying to stay on track , but being an ackrinim you seem to constantly be knocked back , Giving up these tablets is the hardest thing ive ever done my appetites gone everything feels wrong but I kno I have to stay strong ! Even if im told I aint right for my college course I aint good enough ... that's how it feels cant even consume my meals , lacking strength im home all the time back to feeling like im losing my mind , this is what it feels like to be out of the mould , it's a lot for just a 16 year old , but I forgot this is how it feels to be an ackrenem , people judge but don't know the real facts within , have a day in my shoes and realise the pain strain and stress im in.

By Jake Simpson



The Unwritten Diary - Caroline's Sculptural Works



Caroline's sculptural work lent the exhibition 'street appeal'. The human figures suspended from the ceiling were intriguing and could be seen from the pavement outside the venue. As a result the audience inertia that could otherwise prevent entry was overcome. They also presented an interactive element once people did enter the venue as people moved among them. They encouraged visitors to engage with the exhibition on terms personal to them and not behave as they perceived 'they should do' in an art venue. Some of the conversations I had with visitors began with the apparent novelty of the structures but quickly became a discussion about the concepts and issues bound up with them. This led to a consideration of the interaction between the 3D and 2D works on display and the different ways in which they approached the issues at the heart of the exhibition.



The Unwritten Diary - Caroline's Sculptural Works



Caroline's sculptural work that was exhibited on the stairs and on the second floor was also effective in creating interest and debate with the viewers



The Unwritten Diary - Jake's Visual Stories

My work on the ground floor were groups of paintings depicting youth. These were displayed with the pieces of my poetry that I felt related to these images. My intention was to tell a story with the groups and I was very pleased with the reception that they received.



A small white card with text, likely a poem or description related to the artwork, is displayed below the paintings.

They evoked great interaction with the viewers and I was able to engage and discuss with many my intentions with these works. A lot of interest was expressed in my work, both in buying and commissioning future work.



The Unwritten Diary - Jake's Performance

My work usually contains two parts, images and poetry. Sometimes they are combined into a video presentation but for the exhibition I chose to present a performance against the background of the exhibits. I performed three live performances of my poetry on the first floor. These were on both Saturdays with an adult only performance on the Wednesday evening. These were well attended and recieved with very positive reactions from the audience. I wanted to use personal images so displayed the series of ink on paper self portraits as well as projecting one of the original photographic images with lines of poetry overlaying it onto the ceiling.

Caroline's work was complementary to the performance and lent resonance to the expressions of shared experience.



The Unwritten Diary - The Conclusion

This was a self funded exhibition, but I would like to thank everyone from the EYS unit and HW BID Co. for their help and support. Also most of all my artists Caroline and Mackie without whom this exhibition would not have been the success it has been. Overall everyone who came to the exhibition had nothing but good things to say and were very positive. The most common comments were its great to see an exhibition with real strength and depth within High Wycombe and that we need more of it. Some unforgettable moments some unforgettable people, I guess this is how it feels when the unwritten diary gets written, I feel proud.

By Jake Simpson

P.S. Art Happens...

