

**WINSTON CHURCHILL TRAVELLING FELLOWSHIP 2013
CHRIS AVIS**

Is Your Age Showing?

Connecting communities, curating and exhibiting artwork of the 'Third Age'



Danish Artist aged 57

Contents

Introduction and Background	page 2
First impressions of Amsterdam,Copenhagen & Berlin	pages 2-5
The Itinerary	pages 2-5
Executive Summary	page 5
The Exploration	
• Practising Artists	pages 6-9
• Galleries	page 9
• Art participation for older people	pages 10-12
• Art projects based in communities	pages 12-13
• Art enhancing and informing communities	pages 13 -14
Observations	pages 15-16
Recommendations	pages 17
Implementation of Recommendations	page 17-18
Conclusion	page 18
Appendix 1 & 2	page 19-20



Dutch Artist aged 65

Is Your Age Showing?

Introduction and Background

I am a retired senior manager aged 65, who returned to her roots as a London-based artist four years ago. I felt compelled to investigate how the European art world viewed older artists after witnessing the difficulties my peer group faced in London when approaching galleries. I wanted to see if this was similar in other European capitals, to find out if there are other ways of promoting innovative quality produced by older people. By visiting Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Berlin I was able to explore the attitudes of each city to older artists and their potential to exhibit in professional environments as well as commercial galleries.

I was able to explore my interest in the activity of retired people who trained as artists in their youth but who returned to their discipline as older practitioners. In each country I recorded the importance of creative practice to this group of people. Through my involvement in connecting communities in London I was able to recognise similar or extended versions of this in each city.

To ensure that I had a balanced view of older people where possible I chose to visit care homes to see how the visual arts were used with the residents and to observe its value. Again when feasible I also included art classes and clubs in my itinerary.

Amsterdam

I started my exploration into art and age in Amsterdam. This was not a city I knew although I had passed through it once or twice. I had been told that it had lots of small galleries in very picturesque surroundings which turned out to be very true. The city proved to be easy to navigate and I soon found I could manage my itinerary without too many traumas. Looking back now I can see that I was more tentative in this city as I worked out how I was going to photograph and record everything. It was to some extent my training ground.

I found the people I interviewed eager to engage in the debate, often they stated their opinions very clearly providing no room for discussion. They were direct and honest which was sometimes quite disarming. The Art Fair, Kunst Rai presented over a hundred galleries from different parts of The Netherlands with a showcase for their artists. The cafe proved to be a good place to talk to artists where I heard about the Dutch practice of being attached to a professional artist almost like an apprentice. In many cases this can go on for many years with the apprentices still describing themselves as amateurs. Many professional artists supplement their income with apprentices.

The visit to De Hogweyk, the showcase village for those with severe dementia provided me with a memorable set of images of a well designed village complex full of original paintings and sculptures all positioned to complement the environment. I was told the paintings were changed regularly. Local galleries and artists submitted work to one of the managers who organised the rolling shows. One was aware of the residents with their carers but my main memory is of a calm peaceful ambiance. It felt almost like a holiday complex.

Amsterdam

10 days in May 2013

Itinerary

Cobra Museum of Contemporary Art

Artxs Gallery

Eduard Planting Gallery

Kochxbos Gallery

Kunst Rai (Art Fair)

A successful professional artist

Two amateur artists

An art teacher

An art workshop

Sunday Painters Group

Sunday Art Fair

De Hogweyk Village for people with severe dementia

VCA Central Amsterdam Voluntary Organisation

Copenhagen

This well organised structured city provided me with a wide range of arts organisations to visit alongside galleries and some artists. The people I met were friendly but often voiced concern that they might not be able to help me. They presented themselves carefully, proud of their society and their caring culture. My proposals did not fit easily into this structured society where following the rules and ensuring correct behaviour was quite tangible. However once my contacts got to know me a little they were able to signpost me to some very interesting arts and cultural projects, for example in the western suburbs of Copenhagen. The Art Foundation in Albertslund was one of the highlights of my visit to this city.

The Art& Design Factory was an impressive example of how a cooperative of professional artists can operate successfully. Subsidised rent from the municipality helped to keep costs down and some artists were able to reduce their rent through working for the cooperative. This well organised facility suited the Danish culture.

The visit to the Care Home OK Arendse presented me with the most impressive paintings produced by its residents. I was invited to photograph residents with their work which has provided a lasting memory of what is possible with the right materials and masses of enthusiasm for residents living in care homes. All they asked of me was that I write an article for their newspaper.
(See Appendix 2 'Colour and Warmth in OK Arendse')

Berlin

My final visit gave me just over two weeks in Berlin. I had never been before but I was very curious as it has an amazing reputation, art everywhere, young avant guard artists and innovative galleries in a huge variety of locations. It was the city that I had found most difficult when trying to compile an itinerary of interviews, it took months of persistence. Berlin seemed to want spontaneous activity not a carefully planned set of visits. The final schedule covered a wider range of artists than I had achieved in the other cities but unfortunately I was not able to access a care home or a voluntary organisation.

I chose to go when Berlin Art Week was in full swing. This gave me the opportunity to visit dozens of galleries and talk to artists informally in the three major Art Fairs, Berliner Liste, Art Berlin Contemporary (ABC) and Preview Berlin. ABC was predominantly about ideas and conceptual

Copenhagen

10 days in June 2013
Itinerary

Arken Museum of Contemporary Art

Galerie Michael Andersen

Gallerie Tom Christoffersen

Weinberger Gallery

The Danish Art Workshops & Studios

The Factory of Art and Design

Vestergnen Joint Municipalities Project -
Vallensbaek Kommune

Albertslund Art Foundation

An Art Trail

Group exhibition in the Church of the
Holy Ghost

OK -Arendse Care Home

CPH Volunteers



German Artist aged 73

installations with almost no one over fifty. I did manage to find three out of a hundred and twenty exhibitors who admitted to being over fifty, two in their late fifties and one who was well over eighty.

Focussing on artists in this age range meant that they had grown up in post Nazi Germany in a divided city until the wall came down twenty four years ago. It was described by many of the artists I interviewed. They had been children in post Nazi silence and gloom where certain things could not be spoken of. Families were often traumatised by the pain of what had happened. Many older artists are still working on their childhood experiences in their work, covering war, peace, imprisonment, broken cities and decay. Of the artists I interviewed three had left Berlin to experience another world in New York, Mexico and Spain. However on their return to Berlin their original themes continued to dominate their work.

Older artists visiting Berlin often come for a few months but four or five years later they realise that they are there to stay. It is described as a great place to make art, it has a wonderful freedom where strange ideas are accepted. The city has cheap areas to live as well as many warehouse and factory style buildings which provide interesting studio and performance spaces. Berlin accepts 'misfits'. Conversely someone I met described Berlin as a 'graveyard for creatives' All sorts of artists come with some money and ideas but while the life is cheap and easy when the money runs out often nothing has been achieved or produced. Then they either leave or end up on a downward spiral. Older artists seem to fare better than the young. Their life experiences mean that they understand the pitfalls and recognise that happy comfort does not produce art, tension and application is required.

Berlin was the most complex of the three cities. It is still a city in transition with areas changing fast while communities attempt to retain their way of life. My interviews took me to the richest west Berlin suburbs and in contrast to the most derelict areas of east Berlin as well as the inner city immigrant areas. The city has a greater variety of exhibition opportunities than in the other two cities. Areas of Kreuzberg and Neukolln have many hidden project spaces where events are held for just one night where the bar profit provides some income for the organiser. Some artists open up their living space so that others can hang their work for a one night event. This approach operates with or without a curator and often depends on friendship groups. The groupings start as informal networks but can survive and develop into a more substantial regular events.



German Artist aged 57

Berlin

15 days in September 2013
Itinerary

Contemporary Fine Arts

Raab Galerie

Temporary Gallery

Centrum Gallery

Beliner Liste (Art Fair)

ABC - Art Berlin Contemporary (Art Fair)

Preview Berlin (Art Fair)

Two re-emerging professional artists

Two professional artists

Two successful international
professional artists

MPA Performance Art Month
organisation

An Artist in Residence programme
Glogau AIR

The Centrum Gallery based in a working class area just south of Neukölln is run by a British artist with a curatorial background and a musician. They have been in Berlin for five years running the gallery with Berlin style events that fit with studio practice and home life. Many artists and performers described how they had to find ways of sustain their practice and the need to exhibit without external funds or much money. This seemed to be the norm in Berlin, it was acceptable in a way that did not happen in the other two cities.



German artist aged 60

The Itinerary

My travels took place over five weeks in three instalments. The dates I chose made it possible for me to visit Kunst Rai, the major Art Fair in Amsterdam, and Berlin Art Week when three major Art Fairs promote galleries and artists as well as dozens of events across the city.

All pre planned interviews were recorded covering: galleries, artists and arts related organisations in each city. The interviewees all had one thing in common, in one way or another they were involved with the arts, predominantly the visual arts. The itinerary covered different levels of art practice, from the successful trained professional, the semi professional, the amateur, the hobbyist and those involved in art based participation. The galleries ranged from Museums of Contemporary Art , through well respected known galleries, to experimental installation project spaces. The interviews covered, attitudes to older artists, older artists and their potential to exhibit, innovation & age, and issues related to gender. The importance of studio practice to the life of the different levels of artist was also included. Informal discussions in Art Fairs and Art Trails etc covered the same topics, but were noted not recorded.

Executive Summary

As a re-emerging professional artist of 65, I decided to visit the art capitals of Europe to find out if attitudes towards older artists were similar across European society.

I was quite shocked to find out that galleries in each of the cities promoted young talent and only showed artists who were over 50 if they had been part of a stable of gallery artists taken on in their early thirties. Galleries consistently described older artists as less creative, sometimes repetitive and generally predictable. I found that older artists whether well known or unknown practitioners were consistent in their commitment to their work. It provided their lives with substance and purpose. They were aware of the difficulties related to being older but they seemed to accept the situation with the galleries.

My research included a variety of activities that engaged older people in the visual arts such as classes, clubs, and art participation in care homes. I found some of the most impressive work created by residents in a care home in Copenhagen. The work produced in classes and clubs at best tended to be skill based , ideas and free expression were not encouraged and in some cases not allowed . The participants valued attending the classes or clubs attaching themselves to a teacher or organisation for ten or twenty years, far longer than I would expect in London.

Following the overwhelming negativity from galleries in each city regarding artists who are over fifty, I intend to raise the awareness of talented older artists here in London, initially. I am hopeful that my pending application for Open LAB at the Barbican Centre will be successful since it is supported by the Barbican Creative Learning directorate. This will provide a cross disciplinary residency for five days in September or October 2014. I intend to take the resulting production to Berlin in 2015.

I will continue to raise awareness of what is possible through presentations similar to the successful seminar I held at Voluntary Action Islington in November 2013 'Age & Art ideas for Islington from three European cities'. I will use my influence as a board member of both 'Creative Islington' and 'Islington Exhibits' to ensure that older people are included in strategic planning.

I will attempt to extend the range of exhibition possibilities in London by trying out some of the ideas that operate in Berlin

In terms of art participation for older people links with Cubitt Arts and an Artist in Residence programme in Berlin is in progress, and plans for an exhibition in a day centre in Islington for people who are over 55 is in the planning stages. Cubitt Arts and Creative Islington are working on this following my seminar.

Staff from London Colleges who focus on older learners are interested in links for their art students. I will be visiting the Working Men's College in January 2014 to investigate possibilities.

THE EXPLORATION

The following sections will cover all aspects of my exploration. A selection of the interviews for practising artists are described in some detail.

- **Practising Artists**
- **Galleries**
- **Art participation for older people**
- **Art projects based in communities**
- **Art enhancing and informing communities**

Practising Artists

The following descriptions taken from the interviews are a small selection of the artists I met across the three cities.



Janneke - Amsterdam

My first interview involved a 65 year old female professional artist who had spent her life in a studio barge on the canals of Amsterdam. When she first set up her studio over forty years ago, canal life was seen as a very impoverished existence, but now it is viewed as most desirable. She proudly pointed out that her studio was a barque with a mains water supply, a real achievement. Four days a week she goes to her studio, closes the door and works towards her exhibitions. When I met her she was preparing for three shows in September, one in a gallery in Amsterdam and two in towns some distance away. When she is working she does not allow interruptions unless they are planned. She feels

"There is so little time left and I want to paint. I need the whole day with my work. My work is a way of life. No one knocks on my door when I am working, my friends understand"

After some resistance which lasted for a year, she now spends one day a week with her grandchildren. Her work has always been closely woven into her

family life. She has always drawn and painted her family. As her own children grew up she experimented with new materials but she thinks that

"there is no big change as you get older".

Many of her friends are older artists and she pointed out that they are all carrying on

"they want to create the whole story".

She intends to paint as long as her hands and her brain are working.

"I will always have a future as long as I can move my hands. You are rich when you have this work in your life, I will never be workless"

She did not give her advancing years too much consideration, she was more concerned with the health of her family and how they could fit in with her life. She described the importance of exhibiting her work.

"You want your work to be seen, it's not about being famous"

She pointed out that

"When you have a show pending it's in your head in boxes, it's in your head all the time".

Our conversation developed in an easy and intimate way. She vividly described the difficulties of her husband who had a stroke two years ago. Her reaction to sitting in hospital recuperation wards was to draw the carers that were looking after the most important person in her life. She then decided to create small models of these people in clay, a medium she had not used for thirty years. She unpacked a series of these charming characters for me to see as if they were old friends. I felt honoured to have been given a glimpse into the life of this successful Dutch painter whose warm sincerity has remained with me.

Michael – Berlin

In Berlin I met a range of artists from the internationally successful to the professional who manages to survive on his work and to those who do not need to live off their work. My first interview involved a 69 year old man who had graduated with fine art training in his youth, but had spent much of his life first as an art teacher then as a politician. At key points of transition he had attempted to return to his painting but for one reason or another it was not until 2006 that he returned to his studio full time. He



describes himself now as a full time artist but with a pension that provides him with a freedom that he values. He shares a very impressive roof studio with an architect and an illustrator. When I arrived to interview him, having managed to locate this studio up winding concrete steps and across roof gardens I was met with three faces peering at me, I was being checked out to ensure his safety! In the last seven years he had exhibited his work outside Berlin through contacts from his life as a politician. He acknowledged the importance of showing work as he needed to benefit from the feedback. He found that good galleries in Berlin only wanted young artists.

"They want new things not quality. I have had shows in small galleries in Berlin but as these galleries had so few visitors it did not seem worth the effort involved"

He has experienced more interest outside Berlin and is planning an exhibition in Frankfurt next year. He feels very strongly about the importance of his studio practice to his life now

"It is so important, compared to my life as a politician it is now more important. A lot of people say you are lucky you can do your hobby, this hurts, I say come to my studio and see, this is no hobby, it's not stamp collecting, its work, very good work but not easy"

He only wants to carry on painting, as long as his ideas continue to develop he will be happy.

Christa – Berlin

At the end of the metro line in the rich suburbs of West Berlin I spent a morning with a famous German artist who is now 73. She directed me to her lovely home via my mobile phone as the numbering systems hidden behind high walls and huge trees were a complete mystery. We settled in her studio where she happily recounted the story of her life. Her first husband was a famous artist who encouraged her

work but after a time it became very difficult .

"I didn't finish a painting without asking him first!"

Her second husband was an art dealer who provided a very supportive platform for her work. She spent time in New York when her son was young and gained a reputation that dated back to this period. Throughout her life she has painted objects that surrounded her at the time. She produced paintings of piles of her son's toys when he was a baby. These works are currently being shown in pop art exhibitions across Europe. She had a humble approach to her work but her quiet confidence matched the quality of her paintings.

"I find young artists difficult to understand, my generation made paintings while these young people make installations, and it's hard. I understand my own generation best but some of them are dead now".



She described the difficulties she experienced when her second husband died just three years ago.

"When my husband died I thought it was the end, nothing.....but it is not true"

She worked on a set of very large paintings for an exhibition in a church in the middle of Berlin just after his death.

"It's harder now because I have no one to encourage me anymore"

Since then the size of her work has reduced but the content is just as arresting.

"Maybe creativity changes with age, you can see it with people who do expressive paintings, they are

more silent, they may be interesting but they are no longer expressive"

One would not be able to match her work to someone of her age, it is timeless but still relevant to the present day. Of her art, as you would expect, she said

"It's my life, it's the main thing, the only thing".

Emily – Berlin

Amongst an old factory complex in East Berlin I visited a female German artist. Finding her had taken three metro journeys and a suburban train followed by a very long road of high factory walls. Again the mobile phone came to my rescue. She pointed out that I should have been at 77/76 not 76, a five minute walk away. She was a very lively 57 year old who had been an artist all her life, living in various European cities. She described how her family wanted her to study art rather than science which she was attracted to. Her father said

"Artist! This is good, she is a woman so it doesn't matter"

She had been clever at school but her mother pointed out

"Men don't like intelligent women"

After spending time in Mexico with a mural painter she returned to Berlin to complete her art studies. She found it was

"a dark separated city"

so she did not stay. She went to Barcelona where she spent a good proportion of her life, exhibiting her work and organising events that involved women artists from all over the world. She returned to East Berlin six years ago and felt settled for the first time.

"It was the right place, East Germany is another country, it has freedom, it is possible to do things here. You can go to a place and say I have this idea and it is possible to make it happen"

Much of her work during this period has focussed on her German roots; she has explored the horrors of war and the contrast of peace. In a recent piece she had a huge metal bomb made which was hung, swinging, inside an abandoned church. In the nave of the church. representing peace, hung a vast white cascade made from tough plastic containers. An English sound artist designed a soundscape that provided the



swinging bomb with a horrific presence. This church had been bombed by the British a week before the end of the Second World War. The church allowed the installation to remain for 48 hours by which time the press had picked up the story and it was given lots of coverage. A German artist and an English composer had worked together to confront the past, this was special and memorable.

She felt that creativity requires the right circumstances to flourish, this is more important to her than the age of an artist. East Berlin is now open and free compared to the many years that she spent in Spain where she found many constraints, but wherever she has lived she says

"my art.....it's my life"

The Art and Design Factory - Copenhagen

This facility houses 80 artists in 50 studios and 1000sq metres workshop for large scale works and productions that are available for individuals to hire. The facility is for artists who manage and run it as a cooperative. The council originally set it up in the laundry and other areas of an old hospital. It was not deemed to be successful so in 2001 a group of artists took it over. The studios are allocated to applicants via a selection process. The facility is only intended for trained professionals who if successful have to reapply every three years. Some of the artists are able to supplement their rent by working for the organisation e.g. with management and administration. The rent for the whole building is still subsidised by the council.

Approximately 10% of the artists are older. The mix of age gender and type of work is considered within the

selection process. People tend to stay as the facilities and the community are very supportive. Communal activities include an annual Open Studio event and even a weekly group meal cooked by one of the artists who is also a chef, which of course reduces his studio rent.

The Cathedral of the Holy Ghost - Copenhagen

I was surprised when I came across a group of 14 artists from across Denmark in a Church in the middle of the busy shopping area of central Copenhagen. This was their third 'summer show'. The group had met on the internet and had shared the cost of the hire successfully. They were predominantly older artists many of whom had developed strong styles. The process of exhibiting was very important to most of them who found the summer deadline useful and the excitement of a central location very attractive. I watched Danish shoppers wander in and buy paintings which gave pleasure to all concerned.

Galleries

I had twelve in depth interviews with gallery owners or museum curators in the three cities that I visited. Initially I received emails from galleries in Berlin that made it clear that they only exhibited young talent, so no interview was possible. This was not the case in the other two cities. However the overwhelming message that came across very strongly was that younger artists provide the innovation and success that any commercial gallery or museum needs. This reaction was common in each of the three cities

“Curators want artists who have made it or could make it, realistically if you have not made it by 45 or 50 you probably won’t. It’s as if it is of less quality”

“If an artist has not been taken up by a gallery in ten years then perhaps they should just give up. This is the real world”

“Older artists who have been in one or two galleries will not be discovered in the same way as younger talent”

Many pointed out that they did show artists who were over fifty but this was usually because the artist had been attached to the same gallery for twenty years or more.

“We select young artists who we support, sometimes over many years, sometimes not”

If the gallery had been well established for many

years the owner was often over fifty themselves and this affected their attitude towards age. However they still searched for new talent predominantly among young emerging artists.

Curators were sometimes uncomfortable with questions about age and while some admitted

“I have given older artists very little thought” or “I have not come across many artists who are over 50”

they realised this aspect of the arts needed more thought.

Gallery owners were more comfortable when describing their expectations of older people and consequently how they expected older artists to behave.

“After a certain age people slow down and do not reinvent themselves”

“You see development as artists get older but it is not always better, they lose their girlish naivety, less playful, less creative”

“Older people tend to experiment less”

The issue of repetitiveness in older artists, even in those who are very well known was a recurring theme in my interviews in each city. Both gallery owners and curators described the lack of surprises in the work of older artists.

“In Europe we think older people are not open to change, artists can get repetitive as they get older”

“With older artists you know what you will get, there are no surprises, which can be a bad thing”

The concept of a trained artist re-emerging later in life after a period of employment was almost unheard of in each of the cities. I found no examples either in the galleries or the Art Fairs

“I am not aware of re-emerging older artists”

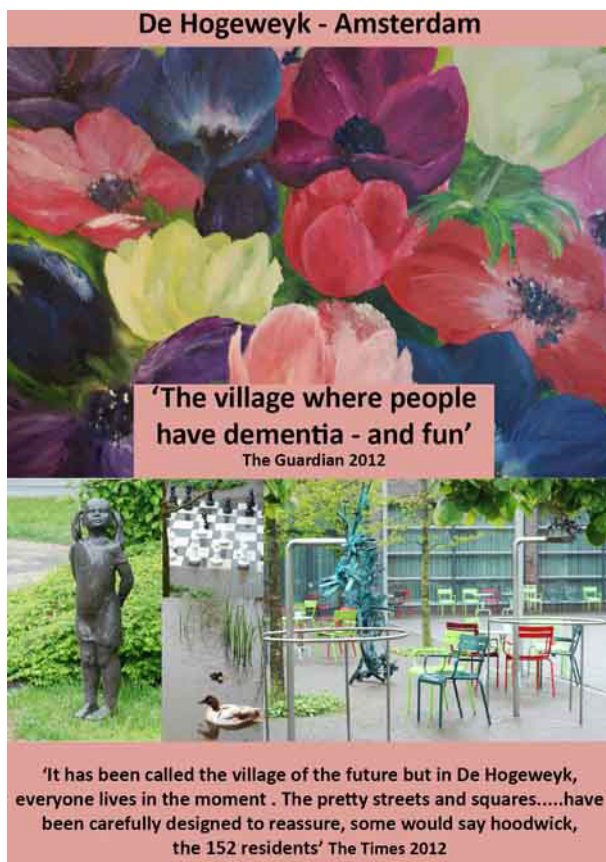
“Re-emerging artists find it difficult to break in”

One gallery owner pointed out that it was a tough life for all artists, she felt that older artists should solve the problem of exhibiting their work in the same way as younger artists, by joining groups and applying for opportunities. When asked how many older artists she had worked with, she paused, thought, and admitted none, at which point she showed some concern about her own advancing years.

Art participation for older people

De Hogeweyk Amsterdam

This village is an exemplar of good practice for those with severe dementia and is a well known showcase



for the Netherlands. The innovative two level enclosed village allows residents to have complete freedom to wander at will. The main boulevard contains shops, a hairdressing salon, a supermarket, pubs of different styles and gardens with water features. There is one staffed entrance and the lifts open automatically with no need to press a button. Freedom of movement around the village is an important element for the 152 residents who live in 'family' groups that attempt to match their original lifestyle

Original artwork is selected and rotated on a regular basis from a wide range of artists. The paintings in the communal areas are bright and colourful, hung well with artist and gallery credits and prices. The residents do not leave the village but many people visit so sales are possible. Sculptures are placed carefully in the grounds complementing the contemporary building design and layout. Sensitive building design, supported by professional paintings and sculptures gives the surroundings a memorable ambiance.

'The village where people have dementia – and fun'
The Guardian 2012

Care Home - OK Hjemmet Arendse Copenhagen



This is a small home in the suburbs where 35 residents suffer from a mixture of conditions including Alzheimer's, dementia and mental health issues. Residents are encouraged, but not forced, to enjoy painting as an activity. The success of the results is influenced by the materials used. Residents paint on stretched canvasses with an art trolley that contains good quality paint, paper plates acting as palettes, paintbrushes, scrubbing brushes, sponges and thin



rubber gloves so that methods can fit the individual needs and capabilities. The range of the results from people aged between 57 and 102 are varied and illustrates their individuality.

Some residents produced narratives related to their circumstances while others were happy to explore colour and texture freely. The manager in this home loves to paint herself and is able to pass on her enthusiasm to those in her care. She is a lively caring lady making sure that life is worth living which was reflected in the paintings

On my visit paintings were laid out in the communal gardens and wine was served to celebrate my very own private view. The residents were proud of their paintings and pleased to have interest taken in them. Normally they are hung in the group facilities especially the catering areas of their home.

'Sunday Painters' Amsterdam

I was lucky enough to visit a traditional approach to painting and drawing in the Netherlands. It involves



groups of ten to twelve people paying a small amount to cover the hire of facilities across the winter months. The group would elect one person to lead the class; he or she was called the 'Little Leader.' For 150 Euros each participant could attend the studio one morning a week for six months. The most interesting aspect of this initiative was the number of years these people had been attending



these self generating classes, anything between 10 and 15 years was the norm. It also has a strong sense of self organisation and promotion. The group I visited were housed in the same building as the Voluntary Action Organisation although they were not linked in any way. They were known in the building as the 'Sunday Painters.' Selections of their work was exhibited in the foyer of the building which housed a range of organisations.



Classes - Amsterdam

I attended an art class on the outskirts of Amsterdam that was situated in a rather lonely business centre, in modern one storey buildings. Here I found ten students with their teacher, an artist who ran the classes for four half days a week to supplement her income.

She insisted that it was only older people who had the patience to learn traditional drawing and painting skills correctly. The young people who had tried this class did not stay long because, according to the teacher, they were too distracted by the excitement of their lives. The concentration in the studio was

tangible but they welcomed me warmly when they heard I was an artist from London. They were passionate about the importance of their work, the drawings and the paintings that they were producing were skilled copies of the still lives that they had been set. They were working towards an exhibition in a gallery in the local village entitled 'Amazing



Amateurs' which appeared to be very important to all of them. The teacher felt that her own creativity had been much greater when she was younger, but now that she was older she was more able to be focussed.

"When you get older your goal is different, it's not only about you anymore, you are less self centred, when I was young I just wanted to have a good time. Process and skill is more suitable for older people that is why my classes are mainly for older people"

Apprenticeships - Amsterdam

I was fortunate to meet two amateur artists who were both 60, at the Art Fair- Kunst Rai, in Amsterdam. They described themselves as amateurs despite the fact that they had spent many years learning from a professional. One of them had spent thirty years with the same 'master' which she described as a kind of marriage. The painting skills that they had both clearly learnt meant that they had this practice as part of their lives. They both owned studios and were involved with local exhibitions and open studios.

"My work is very important to me I love the silence and the space to think"

"For me it is as Virginia Wolfe said 'Moments of Being'"

I found that this arrangement of being 'apprenticed' to a successful practitioner was quite common in the Netherlands especially amongst older women. The importance of learning classical skills, drawing and painting correctly was very important, far more important than free expression.

Art projects based in communities

Culture Week across seven boroughs in western Copenhagen

Project manager and assistant



Through a desire to enhance the image of some of the most difficult parts of the western boroughs and to encourage positive community activity a cultural conference and a culture week was planned for September 2013 across this vast area. The project manager based in Vallensbaek Kommune was 12 months into leading and managing this project. Each borough had contributed financially through their mayors according to the volume of citizens. The most difficult part of this concept had been and still was getting the groups in the boroughs to work outside their boundaries and connect with other like minded groups, out of 200 groups only 20 had actively engaged when I visited the project. The culture week would have a common identity to be used by everyone. The activities would cover everything from choral and gospel music performances, art club & foundation exhibitions, art trails, a culture bus and street processions.

This region of suburban Copenhagen is keen to stay linked to Islington as a potential partner in an arts-based project.

A Sculpture Bank (part of Culture Week)

Ole, the retired citizen who guided me around the Albertslund sculptures and took me to the municipal exhibition lived a short drive away. He proudly described his village of seven hundred residents. This turned out to be an excellent contemporary design of low level homes almost like a housing estate but with a strong



sense of community. Many dwellings included grass roofs, sheep and chickens could be seen in one area and allotments were part of the whole design. Private and public space was carefully organised, as were the community facilities like play areas and a community centre. Ole has spent the last 4 years building an impressive project that he fondly calls 'a



sculpture bank' for his village. Through community initiatives to raise money, sponsorship and via artist donations he has led his community into the world of contemporary sculpture. The village now has a rich range of sculptures carefully located to complement the building design. A leaflet found in a post box near the village entrance documents the sculpture trail for visitors. Ole wants the sculptures to be available to other communities on loan, but this is work in progress at present.

'Creative Cities'

One of my most helpful links in Copenhagen was Jacob Urup Neilsen who was the Danish Officer working for the British Council in Copenhagen. He was able to provide suitable links for me to follow up because of his involvement with an impressive cross Europe project called 'Creative Cities' which finished in 2011. When we met he was able to describe interesting aspects of this work which touched half a million people in 15 countries

<http://creativecities.britishcouncil.org>

'Creative Cities' is a British Council project, set up in 2008. The project was developed in 15 countries across Europe. It provides a platform and a toolkit which can be used by individuals and organisations wherever you may be. Activities are now run largely independently of the British Council, but they continue to maintain their website and to co-ordinate use of the Future City Game and Urban Ideas Bakery.

The Future City Game usually takes one or two days and is played by the inhabitants of the host city. The essential prerequisite for generating new, creative ideas is the utmost diversity of the players' disciplines or social backgrounds.

Art enhancing and informing communities

Art on the Streets

Both Amsterdam and Copenhagen use the streets, especially the busy tourist areas, to promote artist led projects. An excellent example of this was 'A Scarf is a Scarf' located on hoardings in the centre of Copenhagen. The project carried a clear message, was well conceived and produced a striking set of images on this busy square.



In the same district the 'Surprise Gallery' took over a length of hoarding to promote the work of an artist.

Huge images of the work with details that included the prices formed the backdrop for local traders. Free postcards of the work were available with full information on the gallery.



Albertslund station in a suburb of Copenhagen is located in a diverse residential area where social problems were evident. The exit of the station displays a set of pictures illustrating what the residents like about Abertslund. A simple but effective approach showed individual shots of young and old



each holding up a red heart with their handwritten thoughts on living in the area. It was well mounted behind sealed glass and the mass of red hearts could not be missed.



Cocoon - A total of 22 shields based on the struggle of the young unemployed

Albertslund Copenhagen

'By using the sculptures of Jens Galsciot we will make an alternative debate concerning the rights of the homeless people'
Ninna Hoegh



Albertslund's shopping centre contains many sculptures by a well know sculptor who called the group of works 'Art with a Message'. They depict some of the people who spend much time in the shopping area for example, a drunken man, a beggar with a dog, a busker playing a concertina and the young unemployed. Apparently the residents are in agreement with such blatant statements about their society. Sculptures are located in and around the area forming a trail for anyone to follow as well as planned organised walks scheduled in the early evening.

In Berlin the streets were used to tell the stories of hundreds of victims from the Second World War. The tall cylinders containing a photograph and a story were read by passersby and tourists on a regular basis.



- **Practising Artists –
OBSERVATIONS**

All the artists I met from each of the three cities had absolute commitment to their work. They were passionate about what it meant to them and expansive about how their work impacted on their well being and the structure of their daily lives.

The variations of how well known or successful they were or had been with their work made very little difference to their responses about commitment.

Predominantly the element of choice about being an artist did not exist, the work was the way of life that the artist worked around. It was like an illness that one had to live with. Again these comments came from well known and unknown artists.

Out of the ten artists I interviewed in depth two were internationally well known. The others all agreed that they had to find ways either to supplement their income or make work that they knew would be commercial. They had lifestyles that were simple and in some cases quite meagre. Berlin enables artists to live and rent studios much more cheaply than in the other two cities, but it is not a luxurious lifestyle.

Some of the artists were cynical about the 'art world'. They argued that it was not the deciding factor for success. They enjoyed being part of 'arts networks' and sharing experiences with people who understood where they were coming from.

Some artists were willing to work as administrators in an artists' cooperative in order to reduce the rent on their studios e.g. Art & Design Factory Copenhagen

The artists were all adamant that the way they spent their lives was no 'hobby' Even well known artists suffered from not being respected by their own families e.g. Christa

*"My son.....he does not take me seriously"
" very few people understand what we do"*

Most of the lesser known artists used the fact that they worked in the heart of a major city to access exhibition space in other smaller cities or towns across their country.

The process of making art gave all the older artists a purpose to their lives that they valued enormously. This was true of the most successful professionals through to those who were unknown.

- **Galleries -
OBSERVATIONS**

Galleries focused on artists who were well under fifty in each of the cities I visited.

Artists who were over fifty were only shown in commercial galleries or Museums if they had been attached to a gallery for many years.

Most of the successful artists who exhibit in well known galleries were in their late thirties and early forties.

Attitudes towards age and older artists are uniform across the capital cities that I visited, it is thought that older artists slow down, lack innovative ideas and become repetitive.

Berlin provided more scope for older artists to become involved with one off events, pop up project spaces, artist networks and group exhibitions, however even these flexible solutions to showing work seemed to attract artists who were predominantly under fifty with those who might be organising the event being slightly older.

- **Art participation for older people- OBSERVATIONS**

A range of original lively colourful paintings, framed and well hung changes the atmosphere in a care home. Regular changes of work through links with local galleries and artists can work well. Sales of work can take place through care homes

Successful art activity in care homes requires investment in good materials, stretched canvases and a well stocked art trolley with good quality paint and appropriate supporting stimulus.

Although this is obvious genuine enthusiasm from the manager and the staff is vital

Work made by the residents, framed and hung professionally in communal spaces is very important.

Self organised groups who take advantage of low rents offered to older people in government buildings can work successfully. The rotation of the leadership role keeps costs down but the lack of stimulation means that little paintings of copied photographs is the result. There is a high level of commitment in this type of group and its continuation is based on this.

Older people who join art classes run by an artist is common in the Netherlands. Pride in learning observational skills and producing a realistic copy gave the students great pleasure.

Entering work for a local exhibition provides an important goal for many people.

Becoming apprenticed to a professional artist is common in the Netherlands and provides good classical training for some people if used carefully and not for too long.

- **Art projects based in communities OBSERVATIONS**

This provides a very good way to engage a community across all types of creative practice.

While cross borough initiatives pose difficulties in achieving a common approach to marketing and event management it can provide an economy of scale. Connections for interest groups in neighbouring boroughs could be an important outcome for future events.

Harnessing the creative powers of different types of people can provide innovative solutions for community issues or problems.

- **Art enhancing and informing communities - OBSERVATIONS**

Street art can inform and impact across a whole city e.g. Berlin or focus on a local area and raise issues in a community e.g. Albertslund

It can be used to raise the profile of important issues from historical or political dilemmas to sensitive community problems.

Projects need to be well designed and positioned in appropriate settings

Original art work on the streets could be used to promote the work and talents of older artists

Recommendations

• Practising Artists

1. Raise the profile and improve attitudes towards older professional artists
2. Consider new ways to promote the work of re-emerging older artists
3. Promote innovative ways of exhibiting work by older artists e.g.
 - single events, set in appropriate spaces
 - on the streets using billboards
 - projects or competitions for practising artists who are over fifty.

• Art participation for older people

1. Ensure that creative activity for older people is included as a category in the strategic planning of Islington Council and relevant related networks e.g. Creative Islington
2. Encourage Creative Islington to engage with projects that include older people groups
3. Emphasise the importance and power of well resourced art related activities in care homes, day centres and clubs.
4. Invest in framing work produced by care home residents so that it can be hung professionally in the home.
5. Encourage and facilitate links between relevant arts organisations such as Albertslund Art Foundation and Arts Networks in Islington such as Cubitt

Implementation of Recommendations

• Practising Artists

I want to concentrate on raising the profile of trained professional artists who are over 50 who may be re-emerging after periods of employment or returning to their roots after retirement. I would like to increase the potential for these people to exhibit innovative surprising work in a professional environment. The Barbican Centre showed interest in my approach to art and age before my travel fellowship began and have continued to follow the course of my findings. After an interview with the Barbican's Director

for Creative Learning and two meetings with the Partnerships & Projects Manager ArtWorks London I was advised to submit a proposal for Open LAB. If the proposal is successful I will have five days in the Pit theatre at the Barbican to use the visual and recorded materials from older artists collected on the fellowship with a group of artists from different disciplines.

(excerpt from application for Open LAB Barbican Centre December 2013)
Through combining the skills of artists from other disciplines I want to probe the source of the prejudices and preconceived ideas linked to being an older artist and to wrestle with how to promote equality for these artists through a multi media art based production.

A group of sound artists, a poet, story tellers, a singer song writer, a dancer and a musician will bring their skills and creativity to join a group of older visual artists. They will grapple with the notion of art and age, the language used to describe older artists, their position in society and how best to change attitudes to improve equality.

The initial stimulus to provide content and detailed knowledge for the production and for initial debate will include my Fellowship presentation materials and extensive recordings. Improvisation will provide opportunities for groups and pairs to experience different aspects of the issues raised in debate. A selection of innovative and thought provoking works by older artists will be used as the visual core for the different disciplines to work with. This will allow individuals, pairs or groups to attach themselves to the work of one artist to develop movement or sound pieces as they choose. The potential for a soundscape that incorporates any aspect of the debate, even angry disagreement could be developed across the piece. Reflection and analysis will be encouraged through discussion and sharing of the variety of sound or movement sketch pieces produced. Compiling the individual 'sketches' in a variety of different ways could produce ideas for different end products.

I would hope to be able to complete and circulate the resulting production for different audiences. The sound and image version, without the movement improvisation of a dancer would be

promoted on the internet. This would enable the links I made in each of the other European cities to see a final product. I would want to organise the production being seen in Islington e.g. Cubitt Arts, Rowan Arts and Creative Islington. Then I would work on the installation and performance being accepted in at least one London gallery.

The possibility of taking the production to Berlin where I have made a wide range of links with older artists would be my final goal. Berlin was the most difficult of all three cities to develop an itinerary for, because galleries tended to either ignore me or they let me know that they did not deal with 'older people' To raise the profile of achievements of older artists in Berlin would potentially engage a new audience and take the Berlin attitude of 'anything is possible' to new heights.

- **Art participation for older people**

The Chief Executive and staff at Voluntary Action Islington have been fully involved with the whole process of my travelling fellowship from the very first ideas. As a volunteer I had been curating and hanging exhibitions for Islington artists for several years in the foyer and conference room. I was invited to run a seminar to promote the findings of my fellowship. 'Age & Art ideas for Islington from three European cities' which took place on November 14th 2013.

The conference room was filled with thirty five people representing artists who were over 50, Islington Council, Cripplegate, Age UK, Rowan Arts, Creative Islington, Cubitt Arts, a range of day centres, clubs and local community centres. My presentation covered all aspects of my fellowship and I found I was able to interest such a diverse group through story telling. I emphasised the power of art to inspire, excite and build confidence.

So far this seminar has had two outcomes.

Firstly Creative Islington and Cubitt Arts have met with the art teacher from the Drovers Centre, a day care centre for people who are over 55, in order to plan an exhibition for its residents in 2014. I intend to follow up and support this initiative.

Secondly I have been able to link the Elders and Community Programme Coordinator from Cubitt Arts with the manager of Glogau AIR in Berlin.

This Cubitt programme coordinator is keen to set up a project with another city and is suggesting two initial ideas for this potential partnership. Suggestions from Cubitt Arts are as follows.

Firstly, our artists in community studios are based in community centres and sheltered accommodation where they work on their own practice alongside running workshops and education projects for users of the space. The artists could swap and work on a joint project in the partner country, and report back findings, present work online or hold a joint exhibition in our new education space and/or in the host country.

Secondly - A project around 'Public Wisdom' with our local people who are over 55 having an impact in the public realm. A collaborative public art piece designed across countries by two different community groups on a shared brief from Cubitt could work well. Some form of public display or similar could be exchanged for exhibition..

I will continue to support this link with Berlin

My article 'Here's to the old Masters' (Appendix 1) published in the local paper in December has produced emails from staff working in the FE Sector where colleges such as the City Lit and the Working Men's College focus almost exclusively on older learners. I have been invited to talk to art students in the New Year.

I have been booked by Creative Islington to organise a workshop for their networking event on 25th February. This networking session is planned and executed in collaboration with Rowan Arts to promote 'Islington Exhibits' The planning for this event will take place in January but I hope that a group of older artists will want to get involved with the potential Barbican Open LAB project

Conclusion

Art practice and process has the potential to change lives whether it is London, Amsterdam, Copenhagen or Berlin, society needs to recognise this and ensure that this element in older lives is not invisible. The fellowship has given me the increased confidence to contribute to changing attitudes and I will continue to take practical steps to make innovative practice by older artists visible.

Here's to the old masters

Amy Smith interviews Chris Avis for the Islington Tribune Dec 2013



Is an artist's success dependent on her age?

Chris Avis, 65, felt compelled to investigate how the European art world views older artists after witnessing the difficulties her peer group faced in the UK when approaching galleries.

"As a 65 year old re-emerging artist with two degrees, I'm trained yet not viewed as professional," she said. "I consider myself as professional but those out there don't. I wanted to see if there are other ways of doing things."

Avis travelled to Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Berlin after being awarded a travelling fellowship from the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust. She spoke with 12 museums and galleries, hundreds of galleries represented at 6 art fairs, 13 arts associations, voluntary action organisations and 10 in-depth interview with artists over 60.

She found that art galleries are smitten with youth. The phrase 'new talent' appears to refer only to creators in their twenties and thirties, disregarding the creative output of swathes of artists because of their age. A well-regarded gallerist told Avis that while artists definitely develop as they grow older they 'lose their girlish naivety, less playful, less creative'. Another gallerist said that she simply does not come across artists over 50. It is no surprise that one artist feels it necessary to take a whopping twenty years off her age when approaching galleries and then simply brazens out their shock when she arrives at the gallery in person.

"Some artists are quite cynical," said Avis. "They find so many barriers that they result to just open studios and lose their confidence."

Yet Avis remains positive about her practise and will continue to use her position as curator of exhibitions at the expansive Voluntary Action Islington (VAI) offices to show the work of older artists. She is currently in talks with a high profile London venue to put on a group show that raises the profile of artists over 50 and celebrates their contribution to a contemporary art conversation.

"I have a lot of ambition," she said. "And I will have that ambition until I die. One way or another I will get my work out there."

David Studwell and Tessa Gaynn will be showing their work in Voluntary Action Islington, 200a Pentonville Road, from December 3 – January 8. If you are an older artist interested in being considered for a future exhibition at VAI email Avis on chris_avis@yahoo.co.uk

Appendix 2

Colour and Warmth at OK -Arendse

I found the OK – Hjemmet Arendse Care Home tucked away in a collection of buildings set around a garden. No one would ever guess it was there. Even when I found the right entrance the logo was tiny but at least it matched my paper work. I had no idea what to expect when I descended the staircase to the kitchens to look for the manager Lone Haagensen.

With the help of one of the staff I met Lone in the lift going up to the top floor. She was instantly approachable with a wide welcoming smile. I inwardly breathed a sigh of relief, this was going to be an enjoyable visit with such a warm friendly manager. I was shown around the facilities; all so clean, tidy and well cared for. They included everything from the dining room, the sitting room, a place to play darts, a cosy space housing memories and even a very large impressive party room. All the facilities were located in light spacious surroundings

Lone had decided early that morning to display the residents' artwork in the garden for me to see it in sparkling sunshine. It was thoughtfully arranged around the circular pond and statue. I was quite amazed, colour was vibrant and many of the images seemed joyfully free.

The residents had been supplied with excellent materials, stretched canvases of different sizes, good quality paint and a range of simple methods that they could cope with easily. The results ranged from individual narrative pictures to large group abstract paintings. Lone took great pride in explaining the pictures to me and describing the residents who had created them.

The residents appeared and gradually I was able to meet and speak a little with many of them, despite the language barrier in most cases. Some were very willing and pleased to have their



Bo is a resident ,aged 65 who painted her feelings about the home. She really liked living in Arendse but she did feel trapped by her own age and circumstances

photograph taken with their work. They liked receiving my tiny business cards that were illustrated with my work.

The exhibition was completed with a glass of wine in true Private View style.

Lone is a really lively enthusiastic energetic lady who wants life to be worth living for everyone in her care. The paintings reflect this exuberance. I felt privileged to have had the opportunity to visit OK- Hjemmet Arendse and to have experienced such a positive creative environment.

Chris Avis

June 2013

Published in the Care Home magazine