

Breathing Space

Where words fail creativity finds the voice

Breathing Space Project

Yorkshire Sculpture Park & My Artistic Voice

2012 - 2015

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Case Study designed by Asha Munn

Yorkshire Sculpture Park, West Bretton, Wakefield, WF4 4LG

YSP is an independent art gallery, accredited museum and registered charity no. 1067908,



**Art aPProaches Problems unconventionally, naively
and oPen-mindedly.**

Kester,

Conversation Pieces, Community & Communication in Modern Art. University of
California Press Ltd, 2004, p.68



All names and identifying features have been changed to protect anonymity and each young person has given written permission to share their work and art therapy experience

Breathing Space. Case Study

Written by Asha Munn and Janette Robinson

The partnership between Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP) and Asha Munn, in My Artistic Voice, was founded on a shared belief in the benefits of, and connection between, art, landscape and well-being when working with adolescents. From 2009, the award-winning projects, developed and delivered with Asha Munn became the cornerstone of the YSP Arts and Criminal Justice Programme. It was upon this foundation that Breathing Space was built.

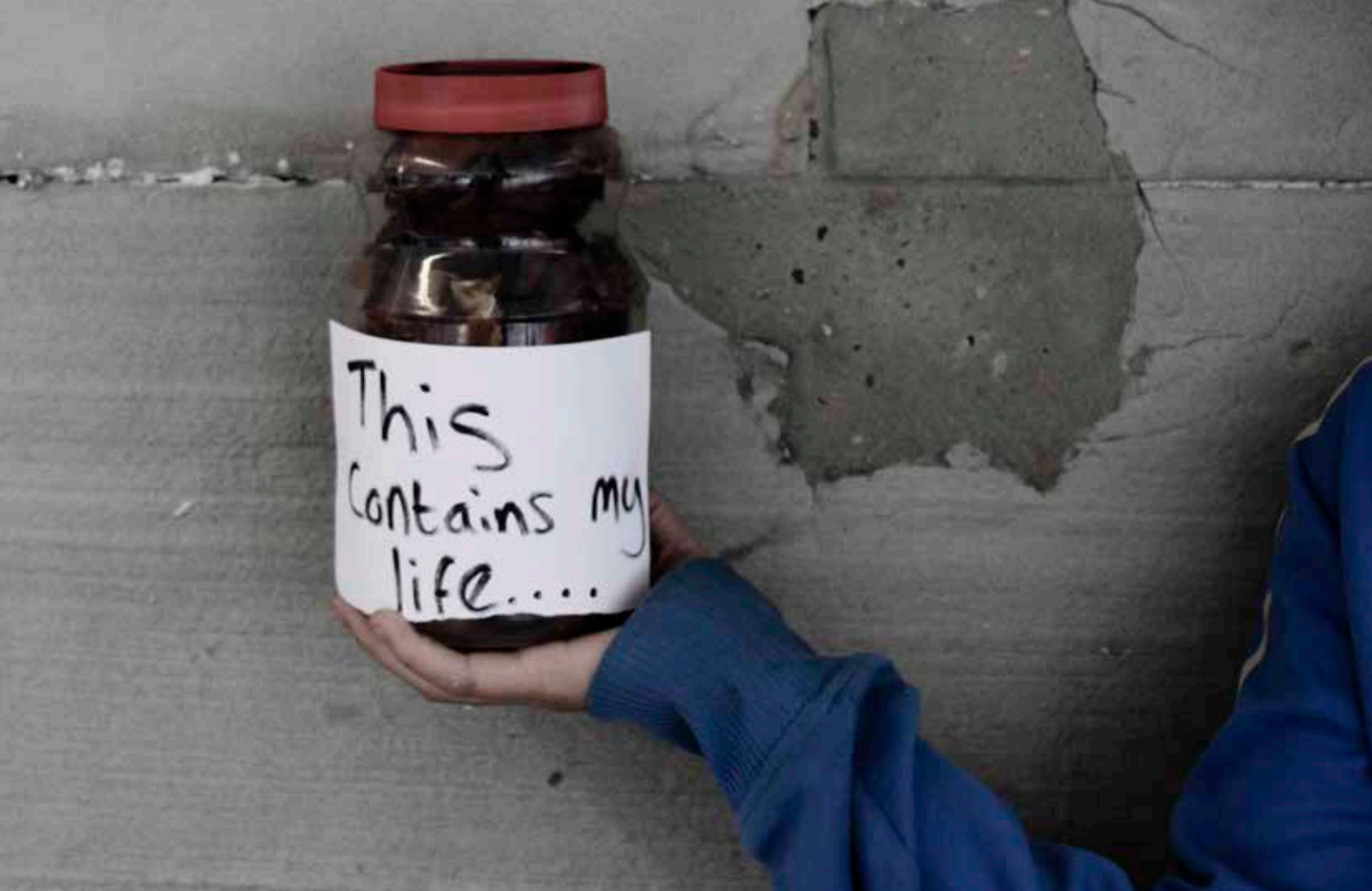
Breathing Space was a therapeutic art project, which provided a safe art space for adolescents from Yorkshire to come together weekly for a year at YSP. The project encompassed a lead practitioner, support collaborator, six mentors and ten young vulnerable adolescents aged 14-16, referred via secondary schools in Yorkshire and Connexions support service for young people.

This ground-breaking model researched the relationship between art therapy, the environment, young people, trained mentors and the artist's own practice.

The unusual use of non-art therapists (mentors) within a therapeutic space provided a mix of skills and experience that an individual practitioner could never replicate. The Breathing Space clients, the art therapy research, and the lead practitioner's artistic response all contributed to the rare opportunities and the new approach which made Breathing Space unique.



'She used to come and see me up to five times a day for support and I never see her now. I haven't seen her for months. Honestly it's amazing.'
Head of Year



Aim

The Breathing Space participant did not fit neatly into an agenda or label. For these adolescents, their teenage angst was compounded by a multitude of complexities which dictated incredibly difficult and at times even desperate life circumstances. In school, teaching staff with numerous children to consider can struggle to find the time to provide attention to occasionally disruptive or absentee children.

By focusing on the themes of physical and emotional spaces, and also the confusion that comes with the time in-between childhood and becoming an adult, Breathing Space encouraged an understanding of personal circumstances and the differences in how we are brought up and where we all come from.

Recruitment

Breathing Space was developed over four years through dialogue with adolescents, a variety of organisations and schools.

Schools agreed a gap did exist for adolescents who were in danger of falling through the cracks, and were often playing truancy from school. They also saw benefit in offering them a therapeutic art space and, as Breathing Space would take place over an entire school day, their support was imperative.

As the potential participants lacked a formal diagnosis, their identification and recruitment was challenging. The art therapist worked hard to ensure all participants were interviewed and that they agreed to join the project. This helped create a cohesive group.

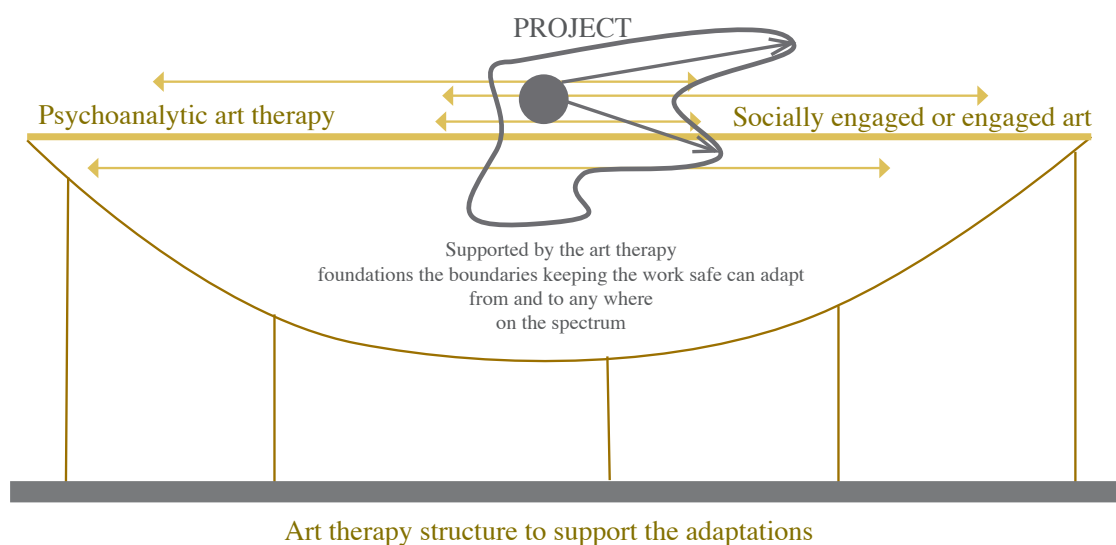
All staff with the project attended: Victim Support; Arts Award; and Looked After Children

trainings. They also completed YSP training and therapeutic arts and sensitivity workshops with Asha Munn.

Methodology

Breathing Space coincided with the project leader's Masters in Art Psychotherapy. Whilst the project existed outside a traditional art therapy context, the research process added another unique strand by providing opportunities for learning, information, support and development.

The art therapist considered the project within a continuum of different art therapy, socially engaged art, and arts in health approaches all within a broad mental health and well-being framework. Art therapy approaches were woven into the structure of Breathing Space meaning it functioned in-between art therapy and engaged art on the continuum. This



allowed opportunities to adapt working methods whilst keeping the work safely held within a therapeutic frame.

Addressing concerns individually in a group context can be difficult for a single practitioner. It was understood that participants would require different things from Breathing Space at different times. Therefore a mentoring scheme was developed which offered a group of art students a unique experience and training opportunity in supporting the young people within the project.

Taking on young, inexperienced team members was considered carefully. The methodology behind Breathing Space had to make sense to the whole team (therapists and non-art therapists) so that it was clearly understood and supported by all involved. The work had to provide boundaries without stifling creativity and freedom. Beginning the day with a briefing and subsequently ending it with a debriefing became fundamental to the functioning and development of the group.

As all participants had truancy issues it was important to create a conducive, non-school environment. The only familiarities were the six-week blocks (half-terms), which were each brought to a close with celebrations, and artwork sharing.

Breathing Space always began with a quick group mark-making exercise. This mitigated the worry of a blank piece of paper and also affirmed for participants, who often felt invisible, that they mattered and were a part of something. Loose themes then led into less

*'This has been my biggest year of development.
I am coming out of education with so much
more than my peers.'*
Mentor



directive art making for the remainder of the day with the approach being adapted by the art therapist on a weekly basis. Each mentor supported two participants for the project duration and they always created art together. A multimedia approach within Breathing Space encompassed both traditional methods and materials and access to technology such as digital SLR cameras. This provided both direction and flexibility within the work and allowed for new layers and meaning.

Setting

From the open-air gallery to a purpose-built art studio, Breathing Space was a safe space



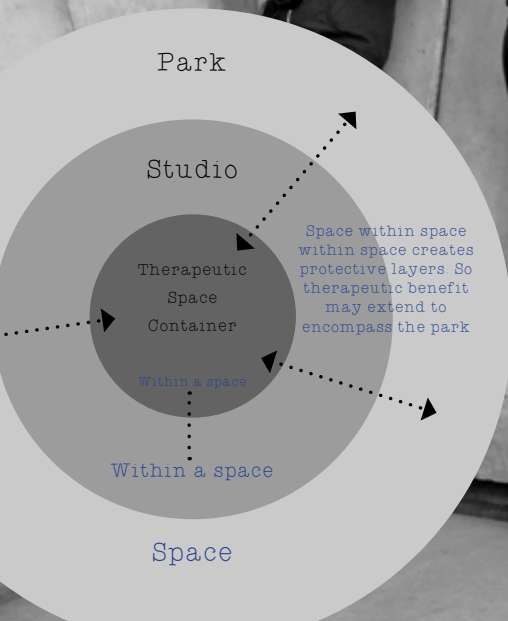
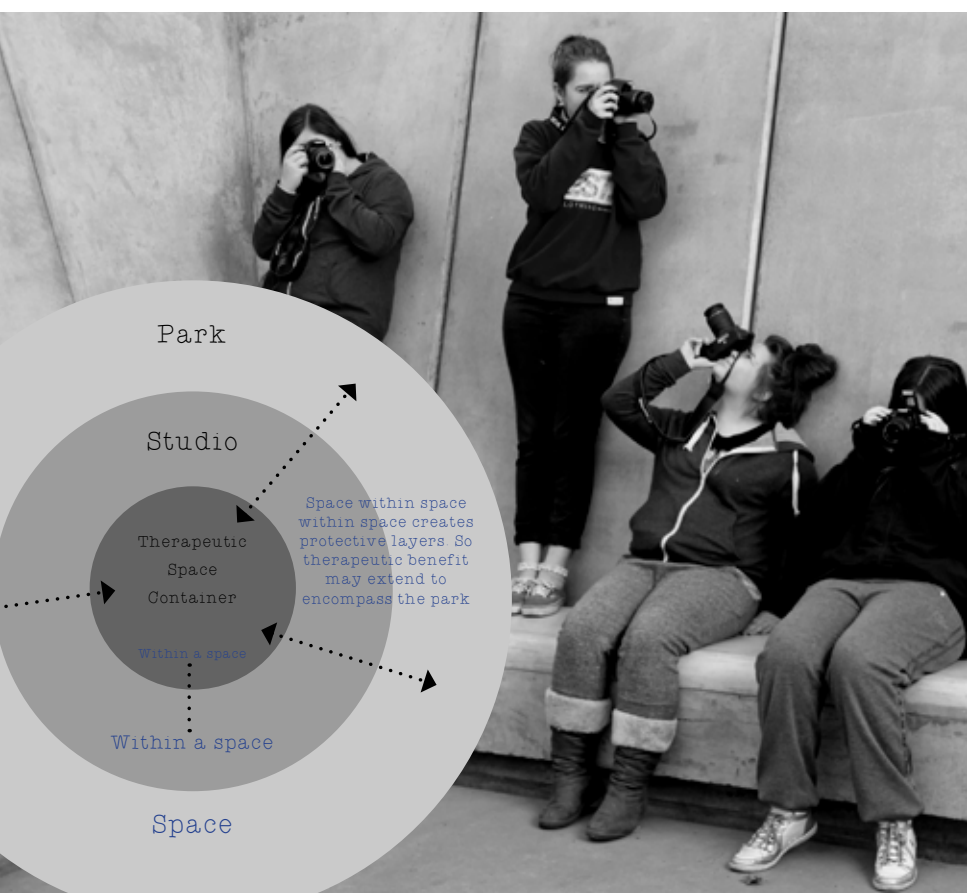


existing within and alongside other spaces. The large windows overlooking the park allowed the landscape to permeate the studio, supporting the shift between the internal and external and provided a safe extension of the work into the outdoors.

'The first few times out at YSP the participants complained about the 'smell'. We (staff) couldn't smell anything. Eventually after discussion they explained they had never had this kind of outdoor experience.'

Mentor

Adolescents often speak of learning through the internet and television, but their 'physical experiences' may be less tangible. Supporting a connection with nature within a technological world can be difficult and so the use of technology allowed the work to be delivered in a language participants understood while also providing a bridge into the physical spaces of the park.





The park landscape provided the space for time-out – a team member might leave the room with a participant when things became intolerable or when identifying separate feelings was difficult. This possibility for time-out was built into the session structure, and participants became sensitive to others, taking turns to use time-out and taking comfort in knowing that individual attention would become available.

The Young People's stories

'Art therapy really appears to meet the needs of the young people, there must be some amazing stuff going on in that room'
Teacher

Two main themes emerged within Breathing Space - the first was home and family. The second related to negative experiences about not 'being seen' properly. This is why participants often slipped under the radar in their lives outside the project. There were recurring themes of invisibility, powerlessness, and transparency. Images were either drawn so softly they nearly disappeared, or were hidden beneath masses of paint, clay and glue.

Jane and Kate shared the experience of chaotic lives, whilst their individual circumstances and life experiences created unique therapeutic needs which impacted on their use of Breathing Space and consequently their resulting artwork.



Kate

'Nobody else gets it. I come here because you don't PRETEND to understand.'

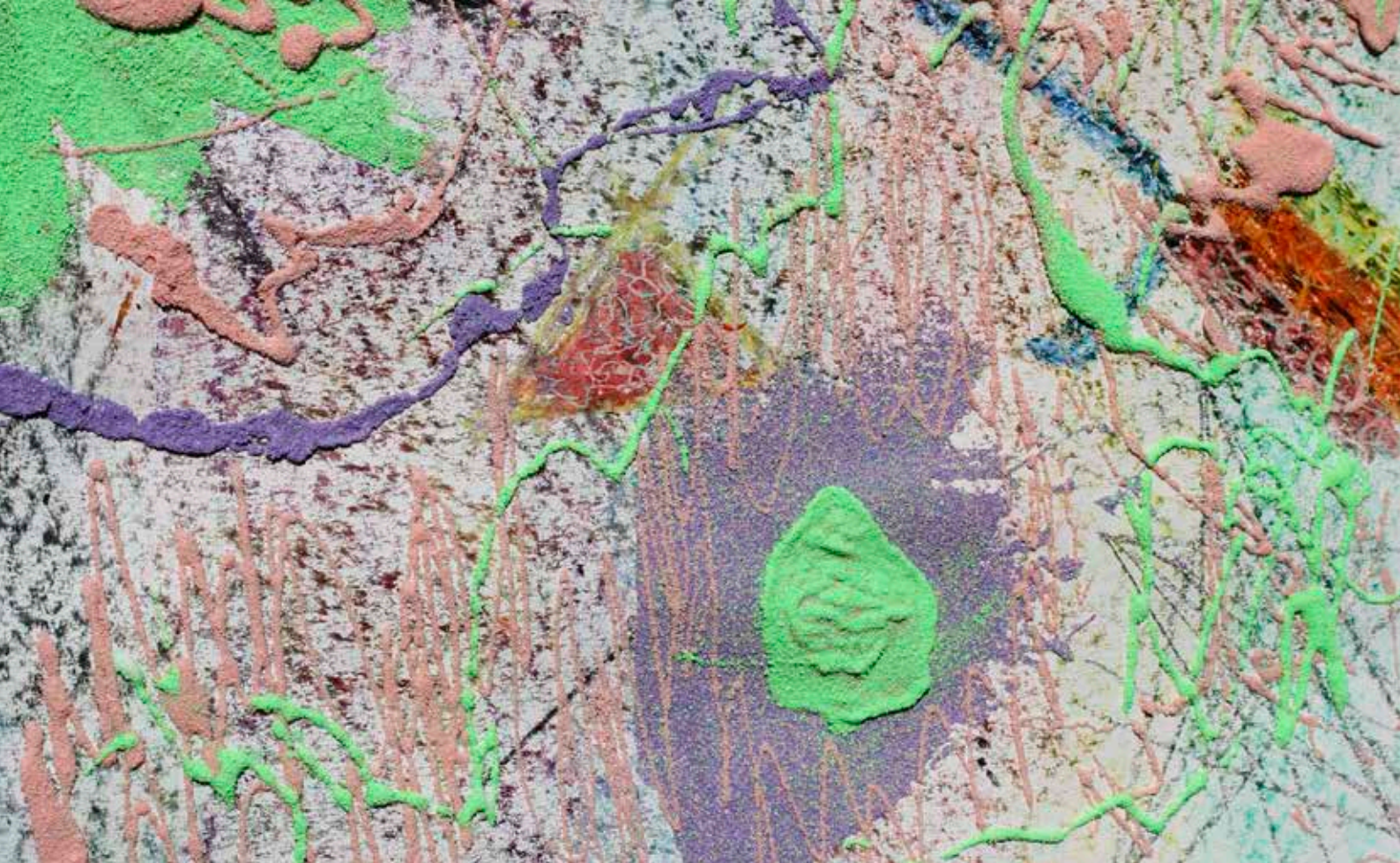
Participant

Kate's mother was in prison for firearm possession; Kate's artwork mirrors a messy and confusing home life.

Kate stares at her hands, her nails are bitten to the skin. It's difficult to describe, but it seems she tries to hide beneath herself. Her language is provoking, but inoffensive; we sense it is her everyday vocabulary. Kate smiles constantly, but does not seem happy. Kate begins our work together by immersing her hands entirely in clay and paint which appears to bring her relief. Then, creating hand-prints, Kate prints trance-like until the paint disappears and the impression left is nearly non-existent.

Kate uses hand-prints regularly, the meditative effect soothing her. When she washes hands heavy with paint it feels painful and sad, as a group we watch it drain away.





Separate colours eventually become intolerable as Kate migrates from hand-printing to swirling thick paint and she creates muddy, soiled colours in which she traces patterns, shapes and words with her fingers. Finally, she screws up the work using it to mop the messy floor. The paper is heavy and as she lifts it, it strains under its own weight. Paint drops and she rubs it into the floor with her shoes. Disposing of the paint and the feelings it holds is difficult and although containing, the mess is real. The group carries on as Kate cleans up her own mess. It feels important that she does it herself because to help seems like an intrusion.

'Kate is always angry on the bus then she comes here making art and tells me she feels better on the way home.'

Participant

Kate's value of Breathing Space becomes clear when after constant truanting her school attempt to remove her. After negotiations, they give her another chance and a smiling Kate says 'you made them give me another chance'. Kate now appears to grasp the image and as the colours separate finally the angry, muddy work subsides and instead a colourful landscape forms. Weekly she speaks proudly to us of her full attendance at school.

During a final review Kate says 'making mess makes me feel better, I think of feelings'. She pauses, 'sometimes red is anger and sometimes love'. Kate photographs her hand as open and releasing within the landscape. Compared to the messiness of her earlier work this hand appears unable to be weighed down by materials or mess. She seems to notice the light shining through her fingernails and tries to capture it, this artwork feels free and she says it is one of her favourites.

'Kate has started sharing more about her home life and she is attending school.'

Teacher



Jane

Jane's artwork describes very literally her life circumstances, reflecting her grown-up role at home. Jane's mother, father and brother have a disability so she is a carer and is bullied at school.

Whilst Kate is the group's biggest character, Jane is her opposite. During the first session, Kate is loud engulfing the room, whilst Jane curls up saying little. Invisibility seems to be her preference as she engages with the materials but not the group, who appear oblivious to her existence. She does not eat for the first three sessions.

During the fourth session Jane makes clay babies covering them with blankets. Could she be looking after her baby self? Working hard, she smiles like a child and afterwards is ravenous - speaking aloud of her hunger.

'Clay can relieve internal tension and negative feelings, while eliciting positive feelings.'
(Choi and Jang, 2012)

The animals in Jane's collages personify people in her life. She says she uses large animals





'because they are fearless'. They depict her survival and need to be brave. Jane has to be a grown up at home and we wonder if perhaps here she can be a child. Jane says 'I love Breathing Space and I never want to leave'.

Eventually, Jane creates artwork to purposely destroy. It feels violent and we are unsure if it will help. However, as we witness her attacks on her art it appears things are beginning to make sense to her.

Jane brings her family to YSP and, given the facts that her family are disabled and the venue is two hours away, this is significant. She says 'I showed them our room through the windows'. Jane's sharing Breathing Space with her family feels important to her internalising the work.

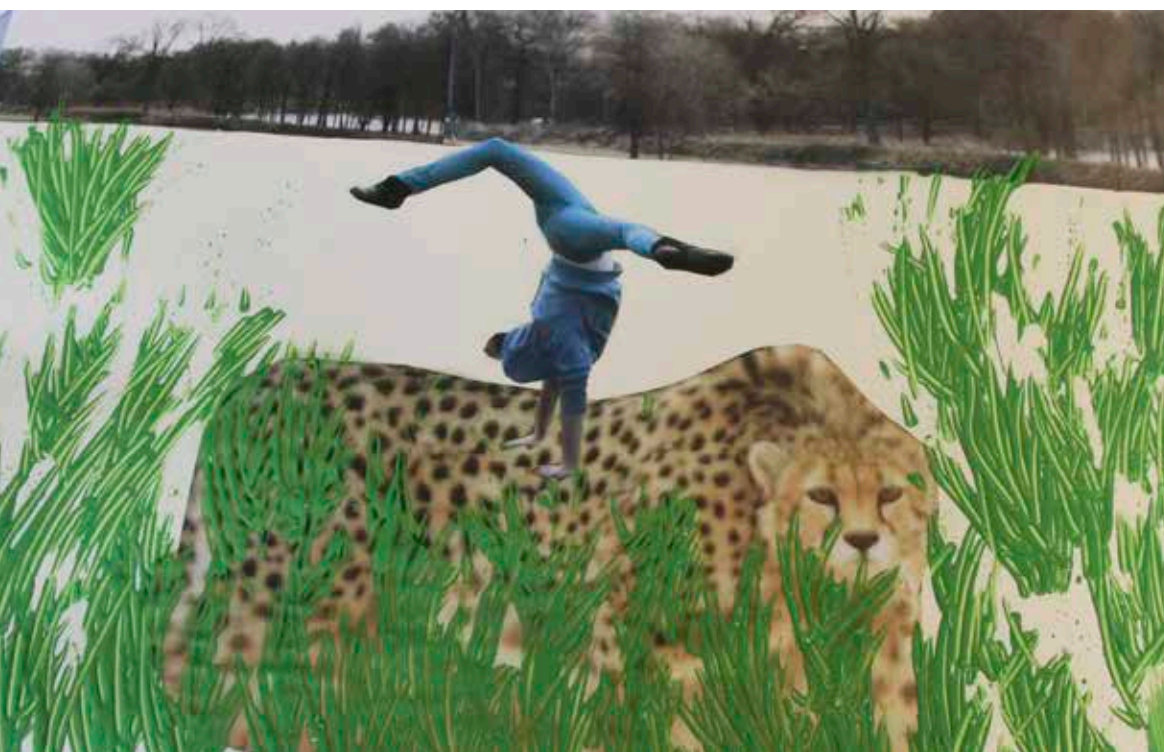
Jane's teacher states, 'Jane is used to being a victim, labelling her emotions is inherent'. In session eighteen Jane takes ownership over her work; writing her mentor instructions to create collages like hers, she finishes with a playful 'congratulations'. The large ferocious animals are replaced with fragile animals. With their less literal and more heartfelt words they seem to have more presence - 'small voice, big heart'. Eventually, Jane re-photographs her artwork containing the images of these small vulnerable animals hiding within YSP's landscape. She speaks of this place as her sanctuary.



Finally, towards the end of our work Jane extracts herself from the background. Compared to the first session where Jane made herself as insignificant as possible, this behaviour is the opposite. Nervously watching the reaction of the group as we are holding our breath, Jane dares to step forward socially doing handstands and they join her, acting like children running and laughing.

'The playing child inhabits an area that cannot be easily left, nor can it easily admit intrusions.'
(Winnicott, 1971:69)

During the final block it appears Jane is regressing, using fearful animals again. However, we see that she takes time creating grass to hide a cheetah. Then she places an image of herself doing handstands on top of the cat. We wonder whether she fought the beast or maybe discovered its hiding place, and so she is surviving better.





Outcomes

I Made That From Scratch Exhibition

An art gallery as a location that traditionally exists to display art is perhaps an unusual setting within which to provide therapeutic art. However, as Breathing Space evolved, confidence and sharing strengthened in the group, culminating in a wish to speak to the wider world through the exhibition I Made That From Scratch.

From the project outset, the team considered with the young people the possibility of showing some of the work to the public. The displayed artworks were developed through closed and semi-closed exhibitions and, although part of Breathing Space, were specifically created and/or altered for exhibition, thus ensuring that the chosen work was appropriate for display. As with each aspect of the project overall, timing was important and the team worked hard to ensure the time was right before contemplating taking the work outside the safety of the studio. Some participants chose not to exhibit and others chose to speak about their work in detail. The exhibition had its own name and space thus creating a new identity, which afforded distance to reflect and view things differently.

The title I Made That From Scratch was developed from something one of the participants said about his/her work. It captured a moment of realisation of the possibilities of what could be achieved through the use of art materials. The Boat House, on the edge of Lower Lake, was chosen as an ideal location for the exhibition. It is a contained space nestled within the landscape, softened by the water's edge and, without white gallery walls; it removed the pressure of a more formal exhibition space. The building was renovated specifically for the group, a process which the young people followed with interest. Their exhibition was given



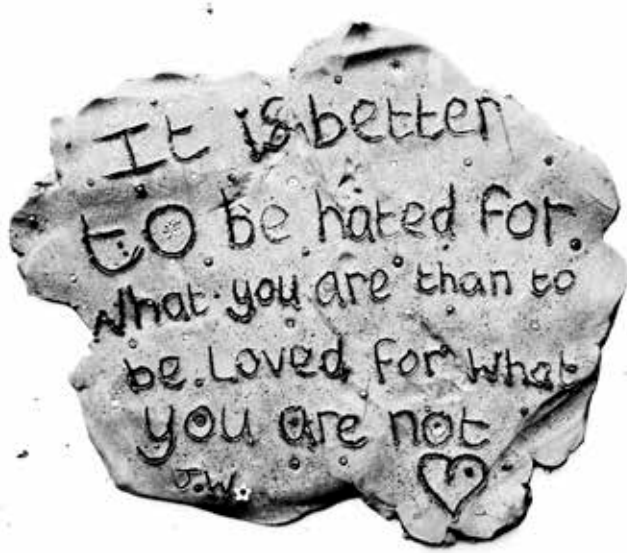


equal profile alongside the major artists exhibiting at YSP and was the first of its kind for the Learning Programme. This was underlined by the founder of YSP, Executive Director Peter Murray, who was the key speaker at the Private View. Over the summer nearly 4,000 people visited the exhibition.

In the evaluation, participants spoke of feelings of value and pride. The Private View was well attended and the participants also chose to revisit the exhibition and casually spoke to members of the public about their work. From the Learning Centre to the Boat House, YSP facilitated the link between the internal and the external by presenting a series of separate safe spaces contained within its landscape; the exhibition was an extension of such explorations.

'I feel this project has showed me that art is much more than what you see in a gallery. It's got meaning behind it.'
Participant





'I felt awkward talking to people I didn't know because some of my work was hard to explain. I also felt proud especially when people said they liked my work.'

Participant

Publications

A limited edition storybook of the Breathing Space Project was designed and created by Asha Munn; printed and handcrafted by a traditional Yorkshire bookbinder.

The Case Study has been shared with partner organisations, peer networks and stakeholders. It is available for free download on the YSP website

Fly Away Home exhibition

'A house, like the mind and body, contains us and allows us to dwell, but also to hide. The fabric constructing our houses witnesses interruptions in our lives and our history leaves traceable paths within the structure. Circumstances form us and our stories become imprinted in the buildings of our lives.'

Asha Munn 2013

Asha Munn's own response to Breathing Space was embedded within the project and culminated in an exhibition at YSP. A sharing event to explore adaption in therapeutic art preceded the Private View. This gave the project and artwork a national platform and wider dissemination through a partnership with 'engage', the National Association for Gallery Education.





Inspired by human nature and the built environment, Asha's work explores social difference, the thinning hierarchical divide and how the inherent need to dwell unites us all. No matter the difference in our surroundings, we are all products of our habitat. Fly Away Home, through a series of bird-boxes which reflect various types of English housing, looks at the types of accommodation we live in and the impact of a changing world.





Legacy

'Every child should have this opportunity. It is by far the best thing our school has ever been able to offer our students.'

Teacher



'We have looked and looked for something for Bea and Helen and nothing has been suitable until Breathing Space.'

Teacher

'I think that Breathing Space staff are like really nice people, they help me through.'

Participant

Breathing Space is distinct from other opportunities for adolescents. The freedom to imagine, create and achieve helped participants foster feelings of self-awareness and growth whilst developing their creative potential through art. Individualised attention meant we were able to detect and address situations and it became clear that participants felt comfortable building positive relationships through art making. Using imagery instead of talking provided a third focus which took away pressure so eventually they spoke about their lives on their own terms. Each participant articulated that they found a refuge from school and that the break





helped them in the rest of their lives.

The project offered a positive family experience, developing adolescents' instinctive creativity in a social context. The participants all led chaotic lives and the group aspect gave permission to voice and depict this commonality. Afterwards, looking together at the artwork provided the necessary distance. At the end of the project participants had their own artwork to take away and this served as a memory both of achievement and something that helped.

The development over the course of the work led to discovering new opportunities, including future work for the mentors. The lead artist is now exploring future therapeutic art work and exhibitions with YSP and has met with funders with regard to building an international platform for her work.

The project's exhibitions and publications form a rich legacy, one which YSP is dedicated to sharing. I Made That From Scratch has become a touring exhibition whilst Fly Away Home is a long-term installation at the Learning Site. Bespoke workshops, tours and activity leaflets extend the reach of the work. The Learning team will continue to interpret the brave, creative journey the young people embarked upon, to people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds.

'This project has enhanced my own art practice more so than my college experience and it



has also significantly boosted my confidence in wanting to go and do an MA in Art Therapy. It has allowed me to fall back in love with the arts after feeling quite negative about it after graduating from my Fine Art degree.'

Mentor

'The project motivated me to finish my degree and I now want to do an MA in Art Therapy the Art Therapy Northern Programme in Sheffield I am very grateful for the opportunity; to have been given the chance to work in the therapeutic space.'

Mentor

'The park is different to anywhere I have been before and I would like to come back.'

Participant

'I can have a break here at Breathing Space.'

Participant

'This has really worked for Lauren. We have never been able to get her to stick at anything for longer than three weeks and this also inspired her to apply to college and she is doing art, which she is also regularly attending.'

Teacher

'Today is a sad day. It's our last day.'

Participant

'Thank you for having me.'

Participant

References

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**Asha Munn, Artist, Art Therapist,
My Artistic Voice, 2014**

**Janette Robinson, Head of Learning,
Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 2014**

