

Everything in Life is Connected: Art and Wellbeing

Text by: Elaine Homer

Arts in health interventions by practicing artists in gallery spaces and with collections are increasingly recognized as invaluable ways to support people's wellbeing outside of clinical settings. Clinical Art therapy into museums and galleries is an emerging area of international practice. The Gerald Moore Gallery has combined these approaches in our innovative **Art Therapy and Wellbeing in Schools Project** that was generously supported by **Mottingham Big Local Refocused**. Over the past 3 years, we have worked with 3 primary state schools in the Mottingham Big Local area to support the emotional wellbeing of pupils and their teachers during the Pandemic and beyond using art. *Everything is connected in life: Art and Wellbeing* will showcase this exciting project and how the gallery artworks, and setting has contributed to people's wellbeing in the schools.

Project aims and outcomes.

The Gerald Moore Gallery is a free contemporary art gallery set within Eltham College. Our exhibitions and art classes are open to the public and we support the local community through our outreach projects. Our mission is to use art and art making with teachers and their pupils as a tool to help them process their emotions and improve their mental wellbeing.

Our objectives for this project were to work directly with young people who are most in need of emotional support through art therapy and upskill teachers, so they have a greater understanding of art as a tool for improved wellbeing, both for themselves and their students. Our partner schools stressed the growing need for more interventions for young people because of Covid and supported our project so that children that would not usually benefit from therapy could have this opportunity.

The teachers and SENCO at each school expressed their support for the Art Therapy and Wellbeing in Schools Project as it tackled two issues that have increased since the Covid pandemic: a growing number of mental health concerns for young people and a lack of support through staff shortages or funding. Public services are strained by the current demands for mental health support and are not currently meeting the needs of society. The added pressure on mental health services due to the implication of a global pandemic has seen a growing trend in anxiety, fear, depression, and young people experiencing bereavement.

With more young people supported through this project we hoped to reduce the stress placed on families who could be struggling with their own emotional wellbeing or are unable to access support for their child. An art therapy group provides a safe space for young people going through personal or family difficulties to explore their feelings. Working with an art therapist can enable young people with mental and emotional needs to be supported in ways that can create long term change. By supporting children at a young age to develop self-awareness and greater resilience to mental health challenges in the future.

Our weekly group Art Therapy sessions, run by an HCPC registered art therapist, and a member of staff from each school were offered to children identified by their school as needing emotional support. The pupils who it was felt would benefit from art therapy and were identified by the school, displayed some of the following issues:

- anxiety
- challenging behaviour
- difficulty with social and communication skills
- difficulties coping with loss, trauma, or attachment issues.

We worked with three different schools, one each year, from the area, Mottingham Primary, Elmstead Woods Primary and St Vincent's Primary. A teaching assistant or family support worker from each school joined the art therapy sessions to gain first-hand experience of an art therapy group and learn about a new area for their professional development. They assisted the art therapist and worked closely to share their knowledge about the young people's needs.

Art therapy with an HCPC registered Art Therapist offers a range of ways for young people to express their feelings creatively through the arts without the need for words. Art therapy in museums and art galleries includes engagement with artworks and gallery spaces primarily for their therapeutic benefits and impact on personal wellbeing. The sessions included art making, engaging with gallery artworks, drama therapy activities and play to meet the diverse needs in the group.

We visited 11 exhibitions over the three years which connected the group with the wider community and global concerns. The children had exclusive use of the gallery space and a quiet room to make art after viewings. The studio was well equipped with a range of creative materials which encouraged the children to experiment and to work on a bigger scale. There was often an air of excitement in the group about the upcoming visits. It seemed important for the groups to experience the exhibitions holistically; so they could experience the actual art works in situ to scale, incorporating moving image and sound installations.

Working with a contemporary art gallery the children could sometimes meet the exhibiting artists in person and learn about their practice. Some of the children told us they felt inspired to become artists because of this. The art works evoked curiosity, a sense of wonder and sparked the imagination which supported members of the group who struggled with anxiety by changing their state.

Art therapy can support young people in crisis through a difficult period enabling them to remain in education and improve their life chances. Transitions can be particularly difficult for vulnerable young people, so we offered two blocks of art therapy to support transition at the start and end of the year. In the short term we actively provided support through Art Therapy to those young people with complex needs, who have been identified by their school as needing emotional support.

Using the gallery art works within art therapy was a focal point to lessen any anxiety. By offering long term art therapy there was potential for lasting change for young people with

emotional and mental health difficulties. We observed that many of the young people in the groups became more emotionally regulated with enhanced social confidence and communication skills they could take forward into their future relationships.

The Art therapy groups enabled the children to:

- get in touch with their feelings
- relate better to others
- become more self-aware
- express their creativity to a wider audience.

Our Art Therapy groups provided a confidential space for children to safely explore their feelings through art during the Covid 19 Pandemic and its aftermath. Attendance to the Art Therapy groups was consistently high and the children were enthusiastic about their experiences. The feedback from the children and staff suggests that the Art Therapy groups became a much-loved and valued safe space for its members to meaningfully connect and to explore their feelings through art.

To embed best practice in how to support young people's emotional well-being through the arts more widely in the school community, teachers at each school attended twilight CPD training sessions on 'Using Art for Wellbeing'. This was to enable a larger group of students with less acute needs who would not qualify for therapy to benefit from interventions offered by teaching staff more widely across the school. To support the teacher's wellbeing drop-in art sessions were also offered at the Gerald Moore Gallery. Our evaluations showed that staff benefited personally from the sessions and were willing and able to embed what they learned into wider practice. We would like to thank all the education professions in our partner schools who have wholeheartedly supported this project.

We chose to culminate the project with this free public art exhibition on the importance of Art for Health and Wellbeing bringing together some of the works and findings from the three years to promote this message to a wider community. We hope by inviting all the school and their families to the exhibition themed around the importance of 'Art for Health and Wellbeing' culminating at the end of this project, we will encourage the local community to learn more about the gallery and inspire more involvement in the arts and culture of the area.

Introduction

Art therapy in museums and galleries 'flexes the frame' by utilising art works and gallery settings for therapeutic benefit (Coles, 2019). Art therapist **Elaine Homer** has worked closely with the Gerald Moore Gallery exhibitions and artworks together with staff from partner schools to provide art therapy groups for pupils with complex needs who would not otherwise receive statutory support. Homer has selected 5 artworks that were previously exhibited at the gallery by **Lily German**, **Haffendi Anuar**, **Sebastian Sochan** and **Gerald Moore** that particularly resonated with group members and will offer her perspective on the significance of the works to the art therapy process.

Gerald Moore

Exploring artworks in the sessions helped the children to get to know each other and bond in the early stages of each group. The children were curious about the gallery artworks and related them through lively discussions to their personal experiences. Children who found it difficult to talk in front of other people seemed more confident expressing their opinions about the gallery artworks. Gerald Moore's animal paintings (Figure 1) were interesting to the group as they talked about their favourite animals and beloved pets.

Talking about animals can offer an indirect way for children to speak about themselves. In art therapy animal symbols can hold parts of the identity and '...protect something valuable in the personality' (Case, 2005: P96).

The children used brightly coloured plasticine to craft their own animal sculptures which embodied the colours, composition, and emotional tone of Gerald Moore's paintings. The art making supported the children to express their feelings and for some to grieve their losses, such as the sad death of a family pet.



Figure 1: *The Dogs of War* (1990) and *Pond Life* (1997) by Gerald Moore

Portraits by Gerald Moore inspired the group to decorate masks which were worn by some of the children in the session. The anonymity of the faces in Gerald Moore's paintings seemed to support the children to feel less self-conscious. By wearing the masks, many of the children in the group were able to act differently and express unfamiliar parts of their personality.



Figure 2: *Girl and Her Dream* (1999) by Gerald Moore

Sebastian Sochan

Visiting the gallery exhibitions connected the children to global concerns. The exhibition *Losing Touch* (12th December 2020 - 27th March 2021) explored changes in communication and social connection 'in the aftermath of the less tangible world of the Covid 19 Pandemic'. (GMG 2021)

When visiting the *Losing Touch* exhibition, the children wanted to touch the exhibits. The therapist imagined this as a residual longing from the Covid 19 Lockdowns. The group were delighted to be able to mix slime and pummel clay with their hands to make their own artworks about the exhibition. Using these tactile materials helped the children to sublimate their emotions and to ground themselves and feel calm.

Sebastian Sochan's reflections on his sculptures seemed to offer a model of how to strengthen connections and mutual support within the group:

'Side by side the works are undeniably independent but slowly they become conversational through their qualities - in things that one lacks, the other completes. Separately the works are fragile and unstable but together they balance and hold each other strong'. (Sochan)

This sculpture titled *Trust yourself with me* (2020) (Figure3) that was made from sugar seemed to the children to show a type of friendship. The therapist associated the image in her imagination with humility: a bowing down to the needs of others. She observed many acts of kindness and altruism in the group; as materials were shared, help was offered, and

the children gifted their art works to each other. The harmonious emotional tone of the session seemed to be an embodiment of the artists interdependent sculptures.



Figure 3: *Trust yourself with me* (2020) by Sebastian Sochan

Haffendi Anuar

The Gerald Moore Gallery caters to the needs of young audiences. Exhibitions are often staged with a child's eye view in mind. The gallery staff cultivate a welcoming and permissive environment within safe boundaries and limits.

During visits, the children were free to explore the gallery imaginatively in a self-directed way. The children responded to the art works through movement and play. Statues were mimicked as the children assumed their poses. The gallery occasionally became a playground as the children moved around the space and hid behind the sculptures during a game of hide and seek.

Art works from the *Soft Façade* exhibition in 2022 seemed to resonate with the children's growing independence. When the children sat in a tightly knit group for some time near Haffendi Anuar's sculpture *Unit* (2021), the therapist was reminded of:

'...children banding together out of sight of their parents' (Coles, 2019).

Anuar's sculpture *Unit* (figure 4) depicts a family group, father, father, and son. Sculpted using the Kain Pelikat- a type of male sarong worn by men across Southeast Asia, the work was inspired by Anuar's childhood memories of playing in his father's sarong: which he experienced as a safe and creative architectural space.

Unit evoked for the therapist a child seeking independence and the freedom to explore their environment with the parent safely nearby. The undulations in the sculptured fabric

also suggested a body moving free from constraints: The therapist thought about the possibilities for different identifications with the work: a breaking away from a parent, from conventional roles or colonial oppression.

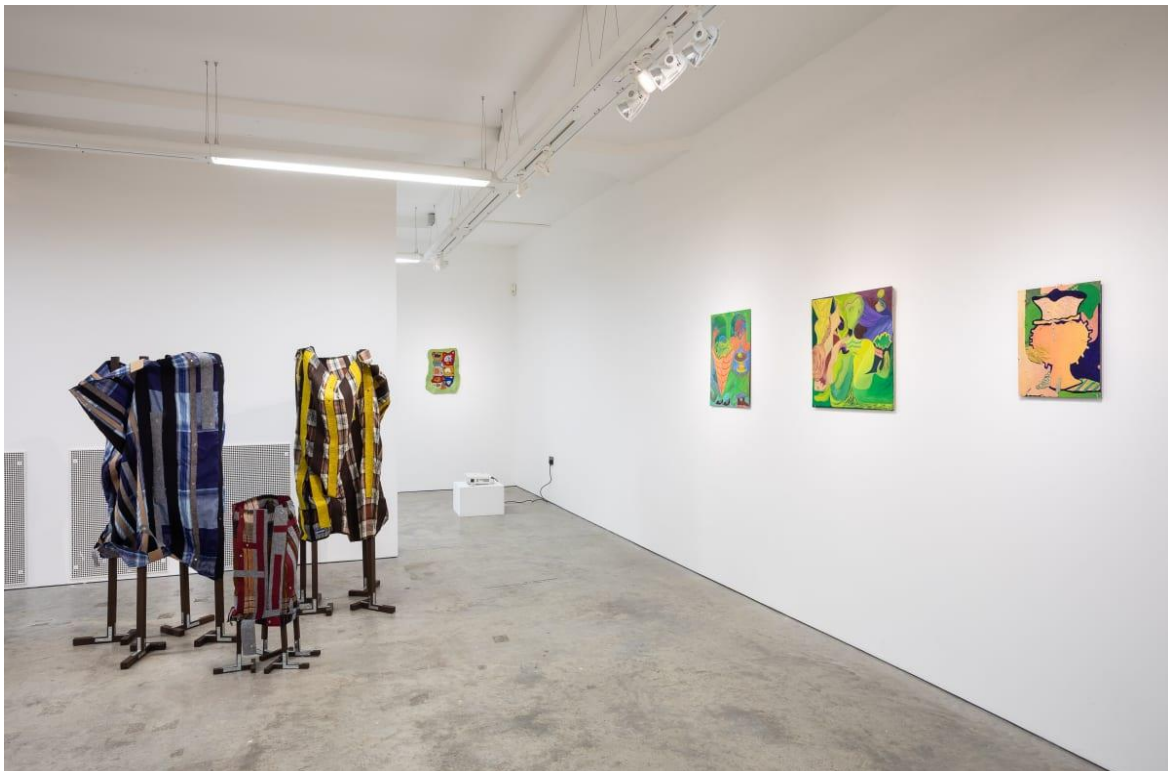


Figure 4: *Unit* (2021) by Haffendi Anuar exhibited in *Soft Façade*.

Lily German

Breaks and endings in therapy can bring up vulnerable feelings about loss and can be an opportunity to grieve. Groups often miss each other and are reminded of people they are separated from or remember loved ones who have sadly died.

A clay tile by Lily German from the *Losing Touch* exhibition became a conduit for the therapist to connect to experiences of separation in the group using active imagination (Jung). The artwork draws on German's memories of mud walks along the Thames riverbed. The liquid appearance of the glaze suggested water flowing over pebbles which evoked for the therapist feelings of sadness about the break. This seemed particularly poignant when talked about in the group, given our recent collective experiences of separation and loss during the Pandemic. The Art therapist was able to translate the gallery artwork in terms of her inner response whilst extracting important themes to support each person's experience of it.



Figure 5: *Creek Dark Blue I* and *Creek Skin I* by Lily German, from *Losing Touch* exhibition.

References

Case, C (2005) *Imagining Animals: Art, Psychotherapy and Primitive States of Mind*. Routledge.

Coles, A, Harrison, F, Todd, S (2019) *Flexing the frame: therapist experiences of museum-based group art psychotherapy for adults with complex mental health difficulties*.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17454832.2018.1564346>



GERALD MOORE
GALLERY

at Eltham College