

Report from the Field: Multi-cultural Dialogue and Transformative Learning in *Arts & Minds* Programs at The Studio Museum in Harlem

**Carolyn Halpin-Healy*

Abstract

This paper presents a report from the field of museum education programs for people with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias (ADRD) and their caregivers. Research is beginning to document the impact of museums on the cognitive and emotional health of people with dementia (PWD) and those who care for them. At the Studio Museum in Harlem, Arts & Minds programs have created a dynamic learning environment for the very forgetful through dialogic interpretation of art and expressive art making. The stories recounted here reveal the powerful potential of multi-cultural dialogue in the museum space to create transformative learning experiences for participants and educators alike.

Keywords: Alzheimer's disease, well-being, quality of life, dementia, art museums, multi-cultural dialogue

Introduction

What do we mean by learning when we are working with people who are forgetting? This is a question that has intrigued me since I began implementing museum-based programs for people with dementia and their caregivers, first at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2008 and then at The Studio Museum in Harlem two years later. As a museum educator with over 20 years' experience teaching adults and children of all ages and abilities, I have been profoundly moved by the discovery that encounters with art can create possibilities for growth at a time that is often characterized by diminishing capacities. People with Alzheimer's disease are living with problems of communication, reasoning, judgment, visual and spatial perception and the ability to focus and pay attention, as well as short- and long-term memory loss. The symptoms vary and they occur in different combinations for each individual. People with dementia, whom medical ethicist Steven Post prefers to call 'the deeply forgetful,' grieve these losses (Post 2000:155). For them, and the friends and family who care for them, the emotional and psychological strain that accompany grief compound the physical and cognitive symptoms, changing the dynamics of relationships. Once-shared activities may no longer be possible because of symptoms of apathy, unpredictable behavior, and other cognitive and behavioral changes. Yet within the safe space of a museum program designed specifically for the deeply forgetful, with trained professional educators, among others sharing similar challenges, art can tap into emotion, memory and imagination. So when the deeply forgetful and their family or professional caregivers choose to come to an art museum, we who greet them have an opportunity to co-create moments of connection by listening to their responses to the art we explore and by joining together in a dialogue of interpretation.

This paper presents an informal case study of Arts & Minds programs at The Studio Museum in Harlem from 2010 to 2014, which I have developed in partnership with Shanta Lawson, Education Manager there, and James Noble, MD, Assistant Professor of Neurology at Columbia University Medical Center.¹¹ It discusses the structure of the programs, the ways in which a dialogue of interpretation in the museum setting may contribute to improved well-being for people with dementia and their caregivers, and the transformative learning experiences that have occurred as a result of multi-cultural dialogue that follows from contact

with art. The potential for museums to function as spaces of social inclusion and personal growth for groups as well as individuals is a subject of interest not only in museum studies, but also in medicine, psychology, public health and justice work (Sandell 2002; Silverman 2002; Sandell 2007; Silverman 2010). As art museums respond to this idea and shift towards a greater emphasis on their audiences, the most successful programming will retain a sharp focus on the art in their care. For it is art, and all that it has to say about human experience, that draws us in. By sharing these brief narratives about dialogue, collected as part of our reflective teaching practice, I hope to encourage museums to value adults with dementia, along with their caregivers, for who they are and what they have to teach us. I offer these stories to encourage museum educators to develop practices that are simultaneously person-centered and art-focused.

Museum Programs for People with Dementia – Background in Brief

As members of the general public, people with dementia have always been part of the museum audience. In recent years, since approximately 2006, museums have realized the potential for service to their communities and their collections by creating encounters with art specifically for people with dementia and their family and professional caregivers (Rhoads 2009:232). They have been joined by universities and not-for-profit organizations in the UK, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and the US, which are working to establish effective approaches and to develop the research base to measure, document and interpret their impact. *Arts & Minds* was founded specifically to address dementia care needs of underserved communities in New York City. The growth of art programs for this population reflects the growing need, though as yet, it falls far short of meeting it. Worldwide, over 44.4 million people have AD/DRD² and we do not yet have a pharmacological treatment to arrest progress of the disease. Persons with AD/DRD may live as little as three or four years, or as long as 10 or more, depending on their age at diagnosis.³ It is therefore important for individuals, their families and society to find ways to maintain quality of life over the course of the illness. Art activates the senses, stimulates the brain, and enlivens the imagination. It sometimes touches the heart. It has the power simultaneously to take us out of ourselves and to return us to our very selves, as the great spiritual writer Thomas Merton once said (Merton, 1955:658). For older adults, involvement in participatory art activities reduces falls, doctor visits and medication use while simultaneously supporting overall health and boosting morale (Cohen et al. 2006:726). Furthermore, art offers us a way to be fully alive in the moment; something that people with dementia can be very good at doing when they feel safe. While museum educators and teaching artists are not clinicians, we facilitate social interactions of a very particular type by fostering aesthetic experiences involving perception and response, as well as artistic experiences involving creative action. When we are successful, we move away from what Dewey calls 'the enemies of the esthetic...the humdrum; slackness of loose ends; submission to convention...aimless indulgence,' and instead we have 'an experience,' which in its fullness approaches a kind of emotional completeness (Dewey 1934: 40-14). Although we do not set out to do therapy, we know that the power of aesthetic experience has the potential to achieve a therapeutic effect.

Current Research

Cognitive stimulation, mood and memory

Research in a variety of academic fields is beginning to document the impact of museums on the cognitive and emotional health of people with dementia (PWD) and those who care for them. Looking at and responding to art is a complex neurophysiological process involving not only visual perception but also sensori-motor and emotional processes (Cinzia and Gallese 2009:686). In their review of 94 studies including 15 randomized controlled trials, Aguirre, Woods, Spector and Orrell indicated for the first time that cognitive stimulation, defined as 'engagement in a range of activities and discussions (usually in a group) aimed at general enhancement of cognitive and social functioning,' consistently improves cognitive function in people with dementia (Aguirre et al. 2013:261). Writing for the *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease*,

Chancellor, Duncan and Chatterjee demonstrate that art viewing and art making rely on preserved abilities and can provide a vehicle for emotional expression. They argue that art making can create a sense of well-being by fostering a state of 'flow.' Their review of the extant literature on art therapy interventions, including 16 qualitative and quantitative studies, concludes that art 'engages attention, provides pleasure, and improves neuropsychiatric symptoms, social behavior, and self-esteem' (Chancellor et al. 2014:4). A 2009 study of programs at the National Gallery of Australia confirms what educators in the field note. That is, aesthetic experience in the museum setting, in dialogue with others, taps higher order cognitive skills of listening, analyzing and speaking in people with early to mid-stage dementia (MacPherson et al. 2009). NYU's 2009 study of Meet Me at MoMA reported that the program reduced feelings of isolation and improved mood, self-esteem and responsiveness to the environment in PWD (Mittelman and Epstein 2009:100). In a recent study at the University of Iowa, Guzmán-Vélez, Feinstein and Tranel convincingly show that the emotion associated with an experience can outlast the memory for the stimulus that caused the response. The research team worked with a select group of individuals with ADRD. Through the use of carefully chosen film clips (a standard procedure in psychology experiments) they induced emotional states of first sadness, then happiness. Although the subjects could not recall the details of the film clips they had seen, as compared to the control group who remembered many specific details, the emotional response nevertheless persisted. The researchers conclude that events that are forgotten may continue to induce suffering or well-being (Guzmán-Vélez et al. 2014:117).

Caregiver Well-being

In their nine-year longitudinal study of 406 spousal caregivers, Mittelman et al. concluded that improvement in caregiver well-being reduced the rate of nursing home placement by more than 28 per cent. The intervention provided in the study consisted of six sessions of individual and family counseling, support group participation and continuous availability of *ad hoc* telephone counseling, a relatively small investment for a large return of financial savings and reduced suffering (Mittelman et al. 2006). Museum based programs offer a less direct intervention, which may nevertheless, by keeping participants involved in meaningful, life enhancing activity with social connections, ameliorate suffering and offer hope for living well with debilitating disease. Our own feasibility study concluded that increased participation in museum-based activities is associated with reduced caregiver burden and dementia patient apathy in both quantitative and qualitative findings (Roberts et al. 2014:1).

Potential for Museums as partners in public health

Most of the recent studies describe the actual museum activities very succinctly, saying no more than, 'viewing art work with an art educator.' As this area of study and practice develops, it will be important for researchers to recognize that the overall tone and particular details of the educational approach to gallery conversation and art making are of crucial importance to the success of the intervention in order to more fully understand the specific means by which they exert their influence. This includes consideration of the setting, the art chosen for discussion, materials offered for art making and the quality of facilitation.

In the UK, Camic and Chatterjee acknowledge the challenge of demonstrating the value of arts engagement in terms of health and well-being, but they nevertheless build a convincing case for making museums and galleries partners in public health through well-designed interventions. They have developed a *Culture and health framework for museum and gallery involvement in public health*, that proposes a model for increasing the numbers of arts interventions and which would strengthen collaborations among museums, universities and the healthcare sector (Camic and Chatterjee, 2013). The quality, character and tone of museum-based interventions will be central to the success of such collaborations. Two excellent interventions at Nottingham Contemporary and Dulwich Picture Gallery provide the focus for Camic, Tischler and Pearman in their 2013 study, which concludes that such programs may 'foster social inclusion,' support relationships between caregivers and individuals with dementia, 'stimulate cognitive processes of attention and concentration and be socially

engaging. The further conclude that museum programs 'have the potential to become a part of a community-based, non-clinical dementia care policy across different countries' (Camic et al. 2014: 166). A noteworthy aspect of this study, is that the research team conceived and developed the project with sustained contributions from gallery educators, museum staff and program participants. The constructivist approach that informs the programs in the galleries was carried into the study, where researchers combined data from a number of validated instruments with detailed field notes and semi-structured interviews with research subjects that explored important aspects of the program: viewing art, making art, relationships and communication in the museum setting. Interdisciplinary collaborations of this sort hold great promise for our efforts to discern exactly how museum-based art interventions work and to develop more programs based on models with proven efficacy.

Arts & Minds at The Studio Museum in Harlem – Theoretical Framework and Practice

The Studio Museum in Harlem defines itself as 'the nexus for artists of African decent locally, nationally and internationally, and for work that has been inspired and influenced by black culture.' The museum's mission statement asserts, 'It is a site for the dynamic exchange of ideas about art and society.'⁴⁴ Four Tuesday afternoons each month, *Arts & Minds* participants gather for that very purpose. The central cohort of approximately 20 *Arts & Minds* participants that has coalesced over the past four years is characterized by an unusual diversity of race, religion, age, level of education, sexual orientation and health status. I use the word 'participant' to refer inclusively to caregivers as well as to people with dementia, to reflect the principle that each person's contribution is welcomed and valued. Participants and educators self-identify as black, white, gay, straight, Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Atheist. The age range spans from 25 to 85 years. Some hold high school degrees, a number have masters, and at least one holds a PhD. Professional caregivers have earned certificates as home health aides, some are nurses and at least one is trained in social work. Some members of the group are native New Yorkers and some come from other parts of the country or abroad. Some are in the prime of health and some are very ill.

The work of *Arts & Minds* draws on expertise in art, medicine, public health and education. The fields of psychology and social work further inform the approach. The interdisciplinary theoretical framework, drawn specifically from education, aesthetics and dementia care, is especially rooted in a firm foundation in art and art history and in my own belief that interpretation is a creative act. As John Dewey wrote so persuasively in his seminal *Art as Experience*, '... to perceive, a beholder must *create* his own experience...' (Dewey 1934: 54). Contemporary practice in museum education is indebted to Rika Burnham, for maintaining and explicating the importance of aesthetic experience and interpretation both by her example as a museum educator and with her important book *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience*, co-authored with Eliot Kai-Ke (Burnham and Kai-Ke 2011).

Critical education theory further bolsters the program model. It is not too strong to say that people living with a diagnosis of dementia, along with their close family members, may be oppressed by the illness and its very real symptoms, by the prevailing cultural narrative of Alzheimer's disease, which focuses on diminishing abilities rather than on retained capacities, and by the stigma attached to cognitive impairment. Paolo Freire's landmark *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first published in 1970, advances the idea that humanization, and even liberation, is possible through learning that is forged with, not for, the oppressed (Freire 2009:48). By co-constructing dialogues with and about art in the museum space, we act in solidarity with those who are living with Alzheimer's disease. By joining us in the museum, these individuals remain part of the wider world of art and ideas.

Solidarity is practiced by following Kitwood's model of person-centered care (Kitwood 1997). Reordering the more traditional hierarchy of human needs, Kitwood proposes an organic structure of inclusion, occupation, comfort, identity, attachment and love. Well executed museum programs touch on these needs in the following ways: participants are warmly invited and included in the meeting; we are engaged in the worthwhile occupation of viewing and making art; matters of physical and emotional comfort are attended to as we extend respect and care to one another; identity is always in play because you respond to and create art

as you do because you are who you are; by spending time together in this way, existing relationships are strengthened and new attachments are formed; over time the atmosphere of acceptance and compassion generates love. It may be surprising to speak of love in the context of museum education, but teaching at its most deeply humanist, whatever else it may be, is most decidedly an act of love.

The humanistic practice of education is further supported by transformative learning theory, which suggests a framework for understanding the changes that participants may experience living with AD/DR. Mezirow's work theorizes a series of phases from an initial 'disorienting dilemma' to 'building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships' (Mezirow 1991:169). The crisis of dementia may launch a process of discovery for individuals with the diagnosis as well as for family members and professional caregivers. Openness to new perspectives, listening, and co-learning are important features of the transformative learning process. By practicing person-centered care within museum programs, educators can help to create a supportive context for eventual acceptance of life as it is now lived, with cognitive impairment.

At The Studio Museum in Harlem, each *Arts & Minds* meeting is designed as a stand-alone experience, which allows participants to rotate in and out according to their interest and schedules. People with dementia may exhibit mild to severe cognitive impairment. Most have been diagnosed with 'dementia probably of the Alzheimer's type,' but some are people with cardiovascular, fronto-temporal or other types of dementia. The entire staff at the museum understands that accommodations that limit distractions and increase comfort are necessary for this group. The generous hospitality of the security and facilities teams contributes immeasurably to the supportive atmosphere.

Each 90-minute program begins with a warm welcome in the entrance atrium of the museum, where the security staff greets the participants, the program assistant gives everyone a nametag and the teaching artist introduces the program for the day. The group enters the gallery together; they are oriented to the exhibition and given a few minutes to absorb the overall impact of the installation. All are then seated comfortably in front of the work that has been chosen as the focus of our inquiry. For the next 30 minutes, we take the opportunity for close looking. This process focuses the gaze and directs attention to encourage aesthetic response and interpretation. In the exchange of observations and ideas that unfolds, participants actively listen to the facilitator and to one another as they express their thoughts and emotions verbally or non-verbally, each one participating according to their own ability. Following the exchange in the gallery, which has touched on the work's formal qualities, use of materials and most especially its intended or derived meaning, the group transitions to the workshop to make art. This component of the program is carefully designed to encourage an exploration of materials in a supportive environment where a pre-ordained outcome is not imposed. Our goal is to frame art making as an open-ended activity, analogous in spirit to the open-ended dialogue that we construct in the galleries. Artist-quality materials, not necessarily expensive, appeal to the senses and provide the means of expression for the maker. *Arts & Minds* founding teaching artist Sarah Mostow writes:

High-quality materials are materials that are thoughtfully introduced, well distributed and laid out, presented in an organized and self-evident fashion. ... Learning what each material can 'say' is crucial to aligning motivations and materials. Indeed, each material must be 'taught': the educator might mention the origin or history of the material, and demonstrate how it is used. After this, the educator may pose a motivating question and the group gets to work. At this stage, the materials themselves do the 'teaching', as their expressive properties and limitations are revealed in the doing.

Above all, materials offered must make meaning possible. ... Good materials are critical to good art teaching, but ultimately it is what we say with those materials, that makes art a vital human language (Mostow 2013:3).

Because the educators encourage everyone's participation in dialogue and art making, and because the adaptations made for the deeply forgetful require active listening and slower pacing, the approach fosters a safe space for compassionate engagement. The mindful application of principles of inclusion accompanied by the use of high quality materials and above all, a focus on art, allows for the possibility of meaningful aesthetic experience, that is distinct from entertainment and which opens the door for personal growth.

Dialogue in the Museum

The act of interpretation is one of drawing meaning from the object at hand, in this case the work of art at the center of our inquiry. Through the exchange of observations, ideas, feelings, memories, and stories in response to art, participants and educators alike have the opportunity to learn about the lives, values, beliefs, and histories of people different from themselves and to reflect upon their own. In the process, participants and the educators who work with them grow in confidence, self-esteem and creativity. This reflective process has the potential to influence an individual's interpretation of attitudes, assumptions and life histories. In ways both large and small, we are discovering that encounters with art that encourage a rich, engaging and deeply textured exchange of responses, contribute in a very substantial way to transformative learning, that is to say fundamental shifts in the ways participants view themselves and the world.

The staff of *Arts & Minds* cultivates a warm, accepting tone that acknowledges and respects the reality of our participants' lives. The idea of Alzheimer's disease carries a great deal of fear and stigma for those living with the diagnosis as well as for their family members, and we work to counteract that by acknowledging the many capacities that people with dementia retain. It is a natural tendency for caregivers to focus on what is being lost day by day and thereby not notice or appreciate all that is still there. Museum-based programs highlight the retained faculties of people with dementia and sometimes even reveal capacities that have never had a chance to surface before. Recognition of the preserved or newly discovered abilities and interests of people with dementia represents a profound shift in thinking that can have important ramifications for the caregiver role and indeed for improved self-esteem, elevated mood and overall well-being for the person with dementia as well.

In the context of our meetings, it is accepted that people have this disease that affects behavior and that they may sometimes speak or act in ways that might otherwise be inappropriate. If, for example, a participant unbuttons his shirt in the gallery, as once happened as the group contemplated a sculpture of a bare-torsoed Buddha at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, he is simply and non-judgmentally asked to button his shirt and we refocus on the art. The educator may acknowledge that the gesture had meaning and remark on the participant's action, thereby making a connection between the sculpture and the non-verbal act of undressing, or the body in a state of undress in art and in life. In any case, safety and acceptance are central to the dynamic. This is not to say that such situations aren't sometimes quite funny and certainly, a good laugh can lift the mood of the group. Our approach acknowledges the fact that our participants are adults with full lives and histories behind them. Though they may now have cognitive impairment, they are very different from children and should never be treated as such.

We are consciously working against age-bias and the attitudes that infantilize older adults, which are all too prevalent in the US. For this reason, it is of the utmost importance that the art under discussion and the materials offered for art making be of high quality. The works of art that are chosen for discussion are not always beautiful but they are complex and worthy of attention. By presenting challenging work and good materials we convey respect and affirmation. In order to maintain cognitive function, it is important to stimulate the brain, therefore the choice of 'difficult' work is entirely appropriate. The question of whether one 'likes' or 'doesn't like' a particular work is acknowledged and set aside in favor of a deeper engagement. Discussions progress from evaluations of the formal concerns of materials and their application, composition and color to the ways in which the elements of art combine to impart meaning. Every gallery conversation is about interpretation, as each member of the group contributes at the level of his or her ability to construct and understand the meaning of the work of art at hand.



Fig 1. Louise Nevelson: Homage to Martin Luther King, Jr., 1974-1985, Painted wood, 104 x 78.5 x 12 in, The Studio Museum in Harlem; gift of the artist 85.6a – e

Back in the studio, following the art making session, the same quality of attention is given to each work made by participants as we continue the dialogue begun in the gallery. Participants present their work and may share comments about their approach, process or intended meaning. By maintaining the focus on the art we are able to have conversations that can engage everyone in the group – the people from all walks of life who now have dementia, the caregiver spouse with a PhD, the professional caregiver who may be in the museum for the first time in her life.

What follows are several narratives that recount participant responses to art and the impact these experiences have had on individuals, on the group as a whole, and by extension on The Studio Museum. These particular vignettes are the entirely subjective choice of the author, recounted here as examples of the ways in which transformative learning may reveal itself in this multi-cultural context. In order to protect privacy, participants and educators go

by first names only when in the museum; for the stories presented below, the names of the participants have been changed.

Max's Question

Early in 2010, during the initial pilot of *Arts & Minds* programs, the group of participants and educators were gathered around the work of Louise Nevelson. The Studio Museum's piece is a monumental sculpture in painted wood titled *Homage to Martin Luther King, Jr.* That day, as usual, the group consisted of men and women with dementia, family members and professional caregivers. At a pace that encouraged close looking, participants voiced their observations: the piece is uniformly black, it is imposingly large, it presents rectilinear compartments containing various geometric forms and apparent component parts of furniture, turned table legs and the like. One member of the group was an elderly white man of Jewish heritage, who escaped the Holocaust as a young child and who attends *Arts & Minds* and other museum programs for people with dementia regularly with his wife of more than 50 years. At that time, he had been living with a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease for more than eight years, and he was beginning to walk with greater difficulty and becoming increasingly quiet, indications that the disease was having a progressively deleterious effect on him. While the group shared their observations and floated speculative interpretations, Max was listening. Eventually, he indicated that he wished to speak. Gesturing emphatically and speaking with great intensity, he was clearly grappling with a difficult question, which he voiced for us: *Why is this huge, black, imposing piece called Homage to Martin Luther King, when Martin Luther King was all about hope?*

The question was greeted with an electric silence. Its very phrasing makes it clear that Max was still capable of learning: he had taken this new experience of Nevelson's art and compared it to his previous knowledge of the civil rights work of Martin Luther King to form a most profound question. At that moment, Max shattered negative assumptions on several levels: about the abilities of a person with Alzheimer's disease to think, reason and express profound ideas; assumptions about racism; and assumptions about older adults and passion for justice. His wife heard him voice this question and together they felt the power of it for everyone present. I could read the expression of pride on her face, restored, despite the many changes Alzheimer's disease had caused in her husband. Max's anti-racist expression of admiration for Dr King created a bridge among the members of the group. The connection was readable in the acknowledgement he received in the form of nods and affirming glances.

Because we are so actively engaged in the exchange of ideas during the time with art in the galleries, this is often the place where I and the other educators discover the ways in which *Arts & Minds* programs are affecting our participants. In that direct interaction, the learning that is taking place is often most visible. But the studio is a place for transformation as well; a place where participants discover their creativity and with it, new possibilities for expression.

Diana's Artistry

When Isadora first began attending *Arts & Minds* accompanied by her daughter Katherine and their professional caregiver Diana, she was already very frail. She communicated non-verbally through facial expression, by uttering various sounds that were not words and through small movements that indicated pleasure and sometimes displeasure. The one time I interfered with her paintbrush, she tightened her grip, jerked it away and made it very clear that I was not to do that! She sat supported in her wheelchair, wrapped warmly in a blanket to protect her from the cold of the winter weather or the summer air conditioning. Together, the three were a model of the ideal caring team, able to intuit needs and to meet them with efficiency and grace. Working side-by-side with Isadora and Katherine in the studio, Diana reveled in the pleasure of handling papers of varied textures and experimenting with paint and collage to create colorfully expressive compositions. Though she was typically content to listen to the discussion in the gallery, she found her creative voice in the studio. 'I never had anything to do with art before,' she said, 'but now [that] I am taking care of Isadora, I am becoming an artist!' By caring so compassionately for Isadora to the extent of making a great effort to come to the museum, Diana has discovered something new in herself.

Diana's newfound artistry is a wonderful thing for her, and quite enough in its own right, but the implications are broader for *Arts & Minds* and programs of this type. A caregiver's day-to-day routine can be isolating and stressful and, depending on the needs of the person being cared for, it is filled with the most intimate acts of caring, which may include bathing, dressing and feeding. When the caregiver's job description is expanded to include accompanying the patient to a museum program, new worlds may open up. Diana's job was to look after Isadora, but at *Arts & Minds* she had some time to care for herself as well. This kind of support for care workers translates to increased job satisfaction, which in turn leads to better job performance. By treating professional caregivers as full participants, museums provide an opportunity for self-discovery and thereby contribute directly to improved care for the deeply forgetful.



Fig 2. Diana and Isadora in the Studio, Arts & Minds at The Studio Museum in Harlem 2011

Leonard's Stories

Much of the art at The Studio Museum touches on issues of race and histories of oppression. For some of our African-American participants the work evokes memories of black struggle, that was their own. There are times when it is very challenging to have the discussions that are provoked by the art on view, but we proceed with respect and real affection. The teaching staff works together with everyone present to create an atmosphere that is emotionally supportive and intellectually stimulating. One participant in particular, whom I will call Leonard, has often expressed the fact that he has been changed by his experiences at The Studio Museum. Contact with the art of Tanea Richardson, Barthelemy Toguo and Jacob Lawrence has stimulated complicated feelings, funny and painful memories and ideas about art and life, which he has shared during the programs. In the process of dialogue, Leonard has found a new voice and he and his wife Celeste are making new discoveries about art at a time of life when they least expected it.

Leonard worked for many years as an administrator in the psychiatric department of a New York City hospital. He has told me that when preparing budgets for the department, he had

often eliminated art programs in favor of more obviously utilitarian expenditures. When he was diagnosed with cognitive impairment of undefined type, he found there were no pharmacological treatments for his condition. 'My doctor told me to try *Arts & Minds*. I have to say, that is the last thing I wanted to do,' he told me recently. He would have preferred to stay home, but over time he has become one of our most devoted participants, never missing a Tuesday afternoon at the Studio Museum. He tells me very often that *Arts & Minds* programs have changed him. If he were still working, he would never again draw a red line through the arts budget. On a number of important occasions, Leonard has shared stories of his life in the apartheid South under Jim Crow law. During a conversation about a piece by Tanea Richardson, *He's Actually Very Intelligent*, 2007, Leonard was reminded of a funny boyhood incident that took place in his classroom. The work evokes the image of practice penmanship on a ruled blackboard, so we passed around a small chalkboard and some chalk among the group to enjoy the texture and smell of these things just for the pleasure of it, and also because multi-modal approaches involving the senses can stimulate memory. Leonard took the little chalkboard in hand and rose from his seat to tell his story. As he spoke, he ran his fingers across the surface.



Fig 3. Tanea Richardson: *He's Actually Very Intelligent*, 2007, Acrylic on canvas, 94 x 100 x 30 in. The Studio Museum in Harlem; purchase, with funds provided by the Acquisition Committee 08.22.2

It was the last day of school before Christmas vacation and teacher and children were 'really going to town' cleaning the classroom. They cleaned the floor, polished the desks and washed the blackboard. Somewhat carried away by the spectacular results, Leonard asked the teacher if he could polish the blackboard. She gave him permission and he carried out his self-defined task with pride, enjoying the glossy black effect of polish on slate. On the first day back after the break, in their shining clean classroom, they learned the effect of polishing slate when the teacher raised her chalk to write and discovered it was no longer possible to mark the board! Leonard was truly sorry and a little embarrassed, but also extremely relieved that he had sought and received permission. Imagine if he had done that on his own! Everyone hearing this story nodded empathetically and laughed with him at the childhood memory. Richardson's piece tapped a memory that was deeply meaningful and richly textured. While the full power of the artist's indictment of racist assumptions was understood and taken in, new layers of personal meaning were added. Because Leonard shared that memory so eloquently, members of the group enjoyed the story. Many remarked that they were transported to their own school days. What followed was a lively exchange of stories about childhood mishaps, penmanship lessons and copying out spelling words a hundred times on the blackboard.

This is not to say that the discussion is always delightful or enlightened. I will never forget the day I was leading a group into the main gallery and one of the first time visitors, an elderly white woman, gazed around the gallery wide eyed and exclaimed, 'Oh! I didn't know Negroes made art!' The other educator shot me a glance, half laughing, half alarmed. I followed with the simple response that any good educator would think of, 'Let's look around the gallery and see what is here. Everything is made by artists of African descent.' It was a teachable moment and while there is no way of knowing if she will remember this fact, at the time, she seemed to take it in. Everyone present at such programs knows that we will sometimes hear unfiltered comments, but it must be said that the honesty can be refreshing and it offers the chance to replace ignorance with knowledge. While the new knowledge may very well be forgotten in the next moment by the person with dementia, other members of the group will have learned something worth knowing.

In 2011, *Transit*, a piece by Cameroonian artist Barthélémy Toguo whose work explores border crossings, inspired a story about geographic boundaries and the color line in the United States in the 1950s. Leonard spoke of his time in the army. He told us of travelling south from Virginia with his integrated regiment to Georgia. Black men and white men were sitting side by side and were settled in for the long trip. After some hours, as they were about to cross into South Carolina, the driver pulled over and asked the black men to move to the back of the bus and the white men to move to the front. The soldiers protested, but the driver insisted, saying they would be pulled over if a police officer noticed black men and white men sitting together. According to Leonard, no one was happy, but the black soldiers encouraged their white colleagues to comply with the situation in order to avoid any trouble before they reached their destination. It was a sad and powerful story about real experience and we have the great privilege of hearing these stories in *Arts & Minds*. Members of the group, who grew up in the North or the Caribbean, white participants and those too young to remember Jim Crow segregation heard these stories from one who had grown up in those conditions. By telling these stories, a black man with a diagnosis of dementia shares his experience and identity with a diverse group that includes white people. He experiences himself speaking and knows that he is heard. Within the context of these museum conversations, perhaps more than ever before, he has found the power of his voice. His wife told me later that the programs 'have made such a difference.' She had rarely seen him speak in this way and indeed she said that he had always been rather asocial. He himself has told me that he has always preferred to be alone and he had deliberately kept apart from whites even after many years of living in New York. Now, he tells me, speaking of participants at *Arts & Minds*, this has changed for him. People of good will, who care about fairness and social justice and who now, as older adults may be working to interpret their own life stories, find that the art, which provides the focus of our interest and attention, can inspire their retrospection. This forum creates the conditions for that work to happen in a supportive, creative, inspired way. The multicultural make-up of the group expands horizons for all of us, providing various perspectives in a dynamic encounter. Just as our close looking allows us to see art, it also allows us the precious opportunity to truly see and affirm one another.

A dialogic process of interpretation of any given work of art occurs against the backdrop of the individual's experience – participants bring their life histories with them as well as their own unique attitudes and assumptions. This vulnerable population is already dealing with tremendous challenges. You may ask, what is the point of bringing up the difficult questions? Why suggest they come face-to-face with art that is additionally challenging? As mentioned earlier, confronting the challenge of difficult work affirms the intelligence, curiosity and abilities of everyone. In the dialogue of response and interpretation, every question and answer is an opportunity to see a different perspective. As any experienced educator knows, while we work to create learning opportunities for our museum audiences, it is the teacher who learns the most.

One of the most profound learning experiences of my life occurred when Leonard responded to the art on view in a most remarkable way. *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World*, a historical retrospective of art produced in and around the Caribbean basin, was the focus of our program. The exhibition began with drawings, paintings and sculpture from the late eighteenth century depicting the region during the colonial period. The show then moved on to a treatment of the Haitian Revolution, first with contemporaneous works and then through modern depictions of important figures and events of the Revolution by Jacob Lawrence. I began the program by

asking the participants to view the colonial period works, many of which included benign, even inappropriately serene, depictions of slavery by European artists hanging side by side with images of torturous conditions, and then to meet me in front of Lawrence's portrait of Toussaint L'Ouverture, part of a series he created in 1938. As the group reassembled and took their seats, I noticed that Leonard, who normally sits in the middle of the group, had chosen to sit by himself at the rear. He leaned back in his chair, slowly threw back his head and gently shook his arms, which dangled by his side. I approached him quietly and asked if he wouldn't like to sit closer for a better view. He replied, still leaning back and moving his arms, 'I need to be back here where I can get some air, where I don't feel as if I'm chained in a ship.'

These words speak so much for themselves that I don't like to comment on them but I have replayed them in my mind many times since. This European-American educator, 30 years his junior, had never imagined herself in such a condition and it was jarring to hear it and to absorb the shock of suddenly



Fig 4. Leonard Sharing his Story. *Arts & Minds at The Studio Museum in Harlem* 2012

understanding the implications for those descended from the trauma of forced migration. The embodied memory of slavery, as it may be held by people of slave descent, was suddenly palpable to a degree far beyond my own historical empathy. After several minutes of quiet looking, the participants began to share what they saw. There were remarks about the flat areas of color, about the silkscreen technique and about Toussaint's elaborate uniform and there were many questions about the history that Jacob Lawrence commemorates in this series. Leonard began to speak from the back of the group, but his chair could not constrain the urgency of what he had to say. He rose from his seat and moved to address the group from the front, near Toussaint's portrait.

Over the next several minutes he presided, sharing with us his memory of when he first learned about the Haitian Revolution as a boy in Richmond, Virginia. At that time, schools were segregated and black history was decidedly outside the curriculum. As he spoke, he conjured the image of his teacher, Mr. Ramsey, who had no textbook that related this heroic episode. Instead, he worked from a set of notes that he had received from his father. We, who were listening now, could see in our imaginations the brown ink on the worn, yellowed pages in Mr. Ramsey's hands as he told his young students the history of the only successful slave rebellion in the Americas. At that moment, Leonard became our teacher and he continues to be so. The quiet, sometimes awed reception of these stories reveals to all of us, educators and participants alike, that this is a safe place – that these stories can be shared in this space among these people despite differences in race, religion, age and health status. 'We can say what we feel here,' remarks Leonard.

Transformative Learning

Art is at the center of these transformations and dialogue is at the heart of this practice of museum education. The horizontal relationship between teacher and student supports the dialogue and creates a dynamic exchange of experience and knowledge. There are other ways to teach in the museum: lectures may be focused on the speaker's own ideas or on the transfer of information, discussion may drive towards a pre-determined didactic point or repetition of the curatorial voice, but dialogue is what keeps the focus on the art and in the process brings the viewers – the seers? – together in an encounter with art and one another. The process of dialogue values the contribution of each member of the group. As Leonard's wife Celeste remarked, 'The insight of everyone nourishes everyone.' Through the collective effort of trying to understand what art is saying to us, we learn about each other and ourselves. In the exchange of intellectual and emotional responses, we may explore truth. In the museum space, we often experience beauty and we are confronted with challenging questions that may be crucial to our life understanding. If this dialogue is carried out in safety with trust and respect, we exercise compassion and love. Our approach to art allows our participants, who are faced with issues associated with aging and dementia, including impairments of physical mobility and spatial orientation, verbal limitations and cognitive challenges, to enter the dialogue slowly and gently.

The art at The Studio Museum is often difficult not only in terms of subject, but also in style and facture. For many of our participants, assumptions about what art is and should be are challenged by the use of unconventional materials and non-representational styles. Conceptual art is sometimes treated incredulously, and curatorial decisions are questioned by some members of the group, but for the most part, participants are open-minded and willing to give their attention to the art that is presented. While the stories recounted above reveal profound transformations, sometimes those shifts in perspective are much lighter.

In 2012 a work by assemblage artist John Outterbridge was installed in the main gallery of The Studio Museum as part of the exhibition *Shift*. The piece is constructed from narrow strips of recycled cotton jersey tied together to create long colorful strands that are anchored to the ceiling from a traced oval to form a curtain, which pools on the floor. The participants of *Arts & Minds* responded in different ways: some folded their arms, they leaned away from the piece, they squinted skeptically. They were perplexed and not a little bit annoyed. They agreed with one another that their own art is better and asked if the curators wouldn't like to hang their work instead. They dismissed the artist as a 'young smart aleck.' The conversation went on

like this for a few minutes until I asked them to give it a chance. 'What would you say,' I asked them, 'if I told you the artist was born in 1936?' Quizzical expressions, hands on hips now, and then the smiles: 'That's a different story! He was born in the middle of the depression and you didn't waste anything!' What followed was a lively exchange about memories of creative thrift. We heard stories about canning vegetables from the garden, about clothes handed down among many children until they served again as rags, and about a ball fashioned from tape and rubber bands because there was no money to buy a basketball. The shift in perspective that occurred when their false assumption about the age of the artist was gently corrected was quick and dramatic.

While we hope for transformative learning experiences for our participants and even work to create the conditions that will make such developments possible, as museum workers our primary focus must be on bringing the people and the art together. We maintain the person-centered priority by keeping the focus on art. Put another way, sustained contact with art affirms human dignity. By devoting our attention to the subject at hand, which serves as the basis of the dialogue, we show respect for one another and find the locus for the human encounter. We can work against the burdens of age and dementia by focusing on what Freire calls the epistemological object, which, in our work, is art. The educator must keep the two, both people and art, at the center of vision and practice.

Conclusion – Implications for Museums

As museums and small organizations such as *Arts & Minds* continue to develop their programs, it becomes increasingly clear that the work of educators embodies a holistic responsibility to our participants, to the art that is the focus of our inquiry, to the integrity of our programs and to the alleviation of suffering. Through its long-standing mission and its ongoing exhibition program, The Studio Museum in Harlem is activated to counter racial prejudice. With *Arts & Minds* programs, that effort is extended to work against ageism and the fear and stigma of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. In 2010, we set out to create artistic opportunities for people with cognitive impairment and their caregivers and to reduce fear and stigma by countering prejudice against those with dementia. In the process, we find ourselves making inroads against racism and other prejudices. As we give to others in open-hearted dialogue, we simultaneously claim our own dignity and conserve the dignity of one another across differences of age, gender, race and religion. It may still be counterintuitive for many to talk about education in the context of cognitive impairment, yet as I hope I have shown in this essay, there remains great possibility for expansiveness and transformational learning that can truly enrich the lives of people who are struggling to live well even as they are becoming ever more forgetful. Art, after all, often has important things to say to us. It can speak directly, in ways that are not necessarily dependent upon memory. Through communal aesthetic experience and the practice of responding to, interpreting and creating works of art, individuals may make subtle or radical shifts in their habitual assumptions and ways of knowing.

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Notes

- ¹ Arts & Minds is a 501 (c) 3 not-for-profit organization.
- ² Alzheimer's Disease International, <http://www.alz.co.uk/research/statistics>, accessed 10 January 2015.
- ³ National Institute on Aging, www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers/topics/alzheimers-basics, accessed 28 September 2014.
- ⁴ From the museum website, www.studiomuseum.org/about, accessed 1 February 2014.

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***Carolyn Halpin-Healy**, Executive Director, Arts & Minds, is a museum educator whose work is dedicated to improving quality of life for all people through engagement with the visual arts. In 2010 she founded Arts & Minds with neurologist James M. Noble, MD to provide museum-based programs for people with dementia and their caregivers. In addition to teaching at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The New-York Historical Society and The Studio Museum in Harlem, she has initiated a course on Art and Interfaith Dialogue at Union Theological Seminary. Carolyn holds a BA in Art History and Criticism with a minor in Studio Art from Stony Brook University, an MA in History of Art from Williams College and an Advanced Graduate Certificate in Adult Learning from The City University of New York.

Arts & Minds

404 West 116th Street

New York, New York 10027

Email: chalpinhealy@artsandminds.org

Phone: U.S. 001-646-873-0712