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Introduction

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For my Independent Project, I am interested in researching art therapy and the way artistic activities make people feel. I am particularly interested in the sensory experience of creating art works and how it very much helps with day to day wellbeing.

Having friends and family with various autistic traits I am also interested in how, for some individuals, attending creative activities can release a passion and feeling that is hugely beneficial.

Artist Research

The following three artists are all on the autistic spectrum. I chose these artists as autism will be a key part of my research.

Andy Warhol



(Fig 1 *Marilyn Monroe*, Andy Warhol, 1967)

I am drawn to this print by Andy Warhol because of the bright colours making it stand out for me. I saw his work at a Tate exhibition which is where I first became interested in his art. After becoming inspired by his work, I did some research on the artist and learned that it is believed he was autistic. This led me to choose Warhol as my first artist for this research.

Andy Warhol was an inspiring commercial illustrator, film producer and director, from Pittsburgh but settling in New York. He came to fame with his colourful screen printed pop art in the fifties and sixties. He led a colourful life and exhibited at many galleries in the United States and here in Britain. It is said that Warhol, although very talented, had at times quite odd, eccentric behaviour, such as collecting things and being slightly obsessive. Professor Fitzgerald of Dublin's Trinity College, believes these were signs of autism. He also goes on to say that "the nation is pushed forward by engineers, mathematicians and scientists, and that it proves that we should accept eccentrics and be tolerant of them" (BBC News, 2004).

Judith Gould director of Eliot House, Britain's leading diagnostic centre for autism also writes that "higher functioning forms of autism are often associated with prodigious talent and even with artistic genius" (Gould cited in Thorpe 1999). Some experts agree with this theory, with many already working on the relationship between autistic behaviour and creative talent (Thorpe, 1999). People with autism seem to have a fantastic ability to hyper focus on a fascination or obsession which, it seems, leads to amazing talents.

Gilles Trehin



(Fig 2, *La Belle Ville*, Gilles Trehin, 2004)

The second artist I am interested in is Gilles Trehin; a French artist who began drawing at the age of five. At 12, he began designing his own imaginary city which he called Urville. Giles' parents said he was typically autistic with delayed speech, hypersensitive to noise and obsessed with aeroplanes, numbers and mountains. His love of drawing came about when he was trying to build a Lego airport for his planes. The city in his imagination, he realised, would be too big to build in Lego so it was then he started sketching it on paper. Giles' book *Urville* was published in 2004 featuring his extraordinary drawings and notes (Moore, 2006).

I am drawn to his work because his skilful drawings come from his amazing imagination. A lot of his work is structured and designed in his head as it was initially too complex to use Lego. I am fascinated by how his imagination works, to be able to build such detailed, complex cities. In 2019 a study showed that living in an imaginary world helped youngsters reduce stress and anxiety in their lives (Sallberg, 2019). It could be argued that this is true for Gilles Trehin as he continues to draw throughout his life, and it is very true of many of the autistic people I have met who have the most amazing imagination and see things which neurotypical person is not aware of.

Blake Zucker



(Fig 3, Blake Zucker Ceramics, 2020)

The third artist whose work I am interested in is Blake Zucker; an artist who makes ceramics and is also autistic. The simplistic, contemporary ceramics Blake produces caught my eye and with further research I was fascinated to learn how ceramics help Blake express his feelings and thoughts when he is unable to. He says that “many times my works are a profound voice when I have difficulty speaking” (Zucker, 2020). According to Kvarnstrom (2015), there are many people who have hidden away emotions due to various conditions or life events and it seems that ceramics, amongst other things, can really begin over time, to release these emotions and pain and to give individual peace. These can be deeply therapeutic in an often complex mind. I think this is why it is so important to keep creative activities available for people of all ages and abilities. From playgroup age to the elderly, it is vital for our health and wellbeing, whatever abilities we have, to be able to re-focus for a moment in time to give our ever complex brains some time to adjust. Whether it is ceramics, drawing or woodwork, engaging in an enjoyable creative activity can be so beneficial.

Key word research

The following section is focused on the three keywords. I have chosen these as they link into the area I am interested in researching.

Art Therapy

Art 'therapy' comes from the Greek word *Therapei* which means 'to be attentive to' (Malchiodi, 2013). Art therapy is a type of psychotherapy that uses art media as its main mode of expression and communication (BAAT, ND). It is widely used in many schools, rehabilitation centres and mental health centres to promote health, wellness and growth (Good Therapy, 2016).

There are many benefits from this therapy through painting, clay sculpting, pottery and drawing and it can help to express feelings and in some cases rediscover memories (Carroll 2006). Studying Design Craft myself, I find many creative activities leave me feeling so much more relaxed. The intenseness of concentration for a set time gives me personally a definite break from the normal day to day worries and concerns that I have whirling around in my head.

We are all living in a worrying time because of the Covid 19 virus. There are many issues to make us worried such as job loss, losing our home, contracting the virus or losing a loved one because of it and for some being just 'stuck at home' can cause stress and anxiety (Scott 2020). There has been a great boost of craft sales and activities in the last year, with Hobbycraft reporting 'exceptional levels of customer demand' throughout the pandemic due to extra time at home and a need to focus the mind on something (Brignall 2020).

Certain crafts with repetitive actions can be immersive and therapeutic. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi suggests that woodwork, and repetitive action crafts such as knitting and crochet, needlework, and working with ceramics allows us to enter a state of 'flow'; "a perfect immersive state of balance between skill and challenge" (Csikszentmihalyi cited in Luckman 2018). This suggests that to enjoy activities, we need to have a certain skill level but also be

able to push our skills. If a task is too easy, it can become boring. However, if a task is too difficult, it can become stressful. This explains why a balance of skill and challenge needs to be met. Looking more deeply into this and why it happens led me to discover how and why we do this. Our natural responses to stress and danger are fight, flight and freeze which I have learned is “largely decided in the amygdala, the centre of the reptilian brain that deals with survival and emotion, but not consciousness or thought” (Steber 2019). This is a natural response to stress and anxiety which leads to ending the activity. So, it is easy to realise why craft activities that require skill and a certain level of repetition have an ability to leave us feeling in a more positive and relaxed state of mind.

Autism

Anna Remington writes that “Autistic people tend to be superior to non-autistic people in many tasks that require processing large amounts of information, picking out details of objects or scenes, or detecting changes in the environment” (Remington 2015). She goes on to explain that these need to be able to follow rules, focus on details and work in a methodical way. She argues that this is different to how creativity and creative people are typically viewed. I disagree with this last point because I feel that creative people, autistic or not, tend to be focused and attentive to detail, and are usually very much aware of the slightest change to their environment. In my experience, it is through this hyper focus that creativity is made and enjoyed.



(Fig 4, *Abstract* Siddharth Gadiyar)

When researching autism, I came across this article about Siddharth Gadiyar, who is autistic. It is such an inspiring read about a young man and his passion for art. Sid struggles with day to day behaviour and emotions and his paintings are a complete release for him from his sometimes chaotic and challenging world. The textures and colours of his paintings give him the contentment in his life that we all aspire to (Susmitha 2019).

We all experience certain amounts of anxiety in our lives but “when someone has an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) such as Asperger's syndrome, they will experience far greater anxiety in their daily life than the vast majority of people” (Attwood 2015). I understand therefore, that therapeutic activities such as ceramics are vital to ease a troubled mind and to give some respite from everyday challenges.

In an everyday nursery class where children are fractious or unsettled, craft and sensory time play a huge part of their routine. “Sensory activities immerse the body and the mind of the autistic child in stimuli he or she can use to develop sensory connections in the brain and reduce stress or anxiety” (Kimble 2019). I know, through watching my own children and during my time as a nursery nurse, these sensory activities can have such a calming effect as well as helping with the development of social skills and hand eye coordination.

One characteristic of many who have an autism diagnosis is the difficulty to verbally and socially communicate. Art can be an effective way to communicate and can also fulfil sensory needs of children on the autism spectrum (Marcos 2016). “Art allows people with autism who struggle with words or are non-verbal, to show their emotions, without words, and as a result is used for some therapy sessions” (Sinclair 2018). Professor Sir Simon Baron Cohen writes that “Classic autism and Asperger's syndrome both share three core diagnostic features”. These include “difficulties in social development, and in the development of communication, alongside unusually strong, narrow interests and repetitive behaviour” (Smallman 2021). I believe that the soothing, repetition of many creative activities is of great benefit and in that relaxed moment, communication progresses. This is something that we, as designers, should be aware of if working with or teaching people with autism.

Art therapy in general, whether it is painting, pottery or any type of making, really seems to be able to give people, not only a great sense of achievement, but that time to re adjust our minds in this ever changing world that we're living in.

Many of us find it so difficult to switch off from maybe a high powered job or being in a stressful environment and I feel it is so important for us all to have that activity in which our mind rests for a moment. Being one of the most important parts of the body the brain needs time to adjust in order for the rest of the body to function. 'Downtime is an opportunity for the brain to make sense of what it has recently learned, to surface fundamental unresolved tensions in our lives and to swivel its powers of reflection away from the external world toward itself (Jabr. 2013). The way we live today can be for many, so fast paced and it is essential to step off and have some occasional respite in order for us to operate to the best of our ability.

In fact, a study published in Neuropsychologia said that "even 10 minutes of exercise can give immediate cognitive benefits" (Macmillan 2017). There is definitely something very refreshing and rewarding from that short boost of activity and fresh air that reinforces the fact that these time out activities are essential for our wellbeing.

Ceramics

From researching art as a therapy for people who are autistic, ceramics is the art form that stands out to me. I believe that ceramics is not only a fantastic release and therapy for people with autism but also for people in general who may be suffering from depression, stress or trauma. "It has the ability to turn despair and despondency into hope, satisfaction and joy" (Lesser 2017). I would without doubt say it is a proven method for art therapy which needs to continue and expand. I am very much aware that people with depression are automatically handed out anti-depressants which, short term, maybe helpful, but to find the correct and more natural way to improve and uplift your mind, it surely does not come from a bottle. These creative therapies are essential to gain knowledge of how to move on from that helpless feeling and to feel confident and motivated enough to take that next step in life.

The self-soothing characteristics of clay may enhance self-regulation through interaction with the medium—smoothing, pounding, building and shaping, among other ways clay can be manipulated and experienced (Malchiodi 2017). The therapeutic movements needed when moulding the clay certainly guide us to the belief that it has the ability to calm the body and mind. It can usually leave you feeling grounded by getting lost in the process with any anxiety or anger feelings being wiped away over a relatively short time.

As pottery instructor Abbie Kasoff-Gray says, “Everything else subsides around you. You truly forget about everything except the clay” (cited in Kuarnstrom 2015). The clay demands your attention and naturally disrupts intrusive thoughts that interfere with your ability to live in and enjoy the moment (Kuarnstrom 2015). There seems to be good evidence that whilst in this flow of concentration, calmness is restored and an equilibrium is maintained, “leaving no room in the mind for irrelevant information” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, p. 58). That intense time of concentration or flow really seems to give your mind that essential time to recharge and refocus. It is all too easy to overload ourselves with work or just irrelevant thoughts and I feel this time out is so important for our well-being.

Alice Darlington teaches ceramics specifically to children with autism and she believes that not only does it help to express yourself but it genuinely helps to build confidence, generates curiosity and improves social interaction (Shaeri 2015). The fact that you can produce an object whether it is a simple thumb pot or an odd looking animal, it usually produces a great feeling of wonder and achievement which can only be improved on if the activity continues.

As well as people with autism, ceramics really has huge benefits for a variety of people who maybe struggling to move on with their lives through trauma, depression and anger. It is widely used to bring out speech and emotions and because it’s so tactile it’s been known to lower heart rates and blood pressure as you begin to relax (Kvarnstrom 2015).

Conclusion

This research has led me to become interested in how ceramics can be a therapeutic activity for people on the autistic spectrum.

There appears to be a limited amount of research about ceramic specifically as a therapeutic activity for autism, so I want to fill this gap by applying the existing research to autism. One of the key researchers I will be looking at for my research is Simon Baron Cohen. I believe that by synthesising research about art therapy, art education, therapeutic methods for autism and therapeutic benefits of ceramics, I can build an argument that participating in ceramics can be therapeutic for people on the autistic spectrum.

For my independent project next year, I will focus on the following question:

How we as designers can become more aware of how engaging with ceramics can be beneficial for autistic people.

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