

## Storytelling at The Dax Centre

Presentation for

Transformational And Dangerous: The Ethics Of Storytelling Workshop

Art-based Social Enterprise and Marginalised Young People's Transitions Project

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I was involved in mounting the exhibition "The Art of Making Sense" in 2008 at The Dax Centre in Melbourne. This exhibition featured art by people with experience of mental illness. One part of the exhibition explored how the inner, psychological world could influence the creative process, while another part of the exhibition focused on the influence of the outer, socio-historical world on the making of these works. This multidimensional approach was a response to a history in which the medical dimension of the art by people with experience of mental illness had been privileged in reading artworks presented for exhibition. This demarcation between the inner world and the outer world, however, raised the problem of how to integrate these different dimensions.

A section of the exhibition titled "Personal Narrative," which focused on the life stories of several artists, attempted this integrative work. One of the wall texts in this section read:

When works by individuals with experience of mental illness and/or psychological trauma are viewed as part of a personal narrative we see that the inner life of the creator and the outer world in which they live are inextricably linked.

The influences of these two domains, the inner and the outer, on the creative process cannot be easily separated. Although there are many layers and dimensions to these works, the personal narrative of each individual creator highlights how closely linked these different dimensions are.

An individual's experience of mental illness or trauma is just one part of their overall experience of themselves and the world around them. Just as an individual is not defined by their experience of mental illness or trauma, their creative effort is equally complex.

The point of this wall text was to convey to the viewer that the life story of the artist showed how an individual's experience of mental illness is just one part of their overall experience of themselves and the world around them. Another wall text in this section, which accompanied a series of works by an artist known as Laura, read as follows:

Laura [1980 - 1996]

Laura was a VCE visual arts student whose work was partly shaped by the requirements of her school curriculum. Her work also reveals, however, a passionate interest in exploring the psychological aspects of those individuals she depicted.

In notes found among her sketchbooks, Laura remarked that the face could reveal much about the soul. The notes also revealed that in a series of anguished portraits, Laura drew on stylistic influences from the work of the Norwegian Expressionist artist Edvard Munch and the Australian artist Albert Tucker.

Among the 229 works donated to the Collection by Laura's parent's after her death as a result of suicide are a series of anguished, bald headed portraits. In Laura's view she was struggling with what she called the "black beast" – her GP diagnosed it as depression.

In this exhibition storytelling was used to emphasise not only the private inner life of the artist but also their connection to broader historical and cultural events, such as the experience of schooling and the influence of art movements. In this way, the artists who created the works were presented as individuals with rich inner lives who have deep connections to the world around them. However, on reflection, telling this particular story in the exhibition raised several issues:

1. The artist, who committed suicide at the age of 16, was not able to consent to being shown in the exhibition and having her story told as she was deceased. Her parents consented on her behalf. Do we owe anything to the deceased about their story?
2. Telling a story such as this in an exhibition raises questions about the duty of care to the viewer. Viewers reported that they found the confrontational materials useful – for example, one teacher argued "My students... have connected particularly to Laura and I guess they've been disturbed. I guess they identify with her age and they identify with the pressures that Laura was experiencing at that time in her life, but it opens up a great deal of discussion." What value might presenting a life story that ends in suicide, however, have for a viewer? Does it not make suicide seem inevitable?
3. Storytelling runs the risk of putting undue emphasis on the artist's personal life as an explanatory framework for the art. Meaning, after all, does not emerge solely from the personal story of the creator but is affected by the materials, the social context, and the deeper subconscious processes underpinning the creative act. The way these factors act on a person may not be readily accounted for by a neat narrative of an individual life.

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