

Tabatha Andrews

## Crafting Language : Dementia, Community and Play

“ A wardrobe’s inner space is also intimate space, space that is not open to just anybody’ Bachelard

‘Play is a thing by itself. The play-concept is of a higher order than is seriousness. For seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness.’ Huizinga

This paper explores the relationships between well-making, craft, personal agency and memory. The Dispensary is a mobile ‘cabinet of curiosities’ currently inhabiting the dementia wards of Chelsea and Westminster Hospital which contains many ‘small acts of craft’ for patients and carers to interact with. It incorporates a complex montage of colourful doors, shelves and boxes filled with visual, tactile and sonic objects designed to stimulate curiosity, trigger memories, and ultimately enhance cognitive function. Part tool-cabinet, part dressing-table, bureau or fridge, the sculpture appeals to conscious and unconscious memory. The work asks such questions as:

-How can sculpture stimulate the brain and body through touch and also provide a sense of being secure, being held?

-When is sculpture a game?

-How can we foster a sense of community in a dementia ward?

In making The Dispensary, I collaborated with two unusual communities; the patients of Chelsea and Westminster hospital and the woodturners of Devon and Cornwall. I ran workshops with the patients, combining poetry readings with a series of simple sculptural interactions. Each patient created their own Rorschach ink blots, which I took to the Tavistock Woodturners and Cornish turner David Trewin. Through a process of discussion and exchange, objects grew into structures that stacked, rolled, spun, made percussive sounds or became tactile handles and finials that were attached to the cabinet.

What happens when we ‘wake up’ Alzheimers and Dementia sufferers through the transformative power of sculpture, rather than resort to medication?

The work explores how the memory of things is retained by the body, and uses this tacit knowledge as a way of finding new pathways of communication in the brain. Inspired by the Montessori method of using ‘purposeful play’ as a means of working with our unconscious or ‘procedural’ memory, objects in The Dispensary act as ‘transitional phenomena’, creating connections between inner and outer worlds and aiding communication and connection. Repetitive and rhythmic actions structure our daily existences and can act as a source of familiarity and comfort for patient and carer alike; placing an egg on a spoon, holding a door handle, constructing the world around us as we choose to.

The word ‘patient’ means to be passive, or acted upon; yet the patient makes the stories here, acting as performer of a work that grows and changes over time: a library containing the building blocks of a language without words.

Through assembling these objects together in the cabinet, I am asking questions about authorship, ownership, and blurring perceived lines between amateur and professional. Who is the patient and who is the artist? Who is the professional or the amateur? Who has control of this environment? Who is ‘making work’?

For a better understanding of this project please see an extraordinary film about ‘The Dispensary’ by Liberty Smith which can be seen at: <https://vimeo.com/181069269>