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To cite this article: Chloe Watfern (2021): “Thom Roberts is an artist and a country express train”. Commentary on “Community participation as identity and belonging: a case study of Arts Project Australia. “I am an artist”” (Anderson & Bigby, 2020), *Research and Practice in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, DOI: [10.1080/23297018.2021.1899847](https://doi.org/10.1080/23297018.2021.1899847)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23297018.2021.1899847>



Published online: 02 May 2021.



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COMMENTARY



“Thom Roberts is an artist and a country express train”. Commentary on “Community participation as identity and belonging: a case study of Arts Project Australia. “I am an artist”” (Anderson & Bigby, 2020)

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ARTICLE HISTORY Accepted 19 February 2021

KEYWORDS Art; community participation; intellectual disability

The community artist and scholar Francois Matarosso (1997) offered one of the first systematic accounts of the social impact of participation in the arts. Through detailed case studies of some 60 projects, including interviews, discussion groups, and questionnaires with over 1000 participants, he found that arts programs had the potential to enrich social lives, bring people together, empower communities, strengthen a sense of place, and improve health and wellbeing. While all these outcomes can be achieved by other kinds of social programs and policies, he acknowledged the special power of the arts to “help people think critically about and question their experiences and those of others ... with all the excitement, danger, magic, colour, symbolism, feeling, metaphor and creativity that the arts offer.” He continued, “it is in the act of creativity that empowerment lies, and through sharing creativity that understanding and social inclusiveness are promoted” (Matarosso, 1997, p. 90).

Since his influential report, countless studies have explored the impact of all kinds of arts programs—from community choirs to experimental new media exhibitions. Only a small handful have looked at how people with intellectual disabilities participate in the visual arts, and what this might mean to them and their communities (Darragh et al., 2016; Hall, 2013; Knutes Nyqvist & Stjerna, 2017; Mordy, 2012; Yoon, 2021; Yoon et al., 2020). Anderson and Bigby’s (2020) case study of Arts Project Australia is an important contribution to this literature, and echoes many of its common themes.

Art leads the way

One of the study’s key insights is that art leads the way at Arts Project Australia. For example, members are treated as artists first and foremost, and their creative practices are given the dignity and respect they deserve. They are provided with the highest

quality materials to work with, and their work is promoted to audiences as contemporary art. As a result, artists claim that title with dignity and respect. Furthermore, they connect, as artists, with a broader community of creatives, curators, and art-appreciators.

The philosophy of Arts Project Australia is shared by many similar organisations across the world—from Creative Growth in Oakland, California, to Action Space in London (Rhodes, 2008). At Studio A in Sydney, an organisation I have been working with as part of my doctoral research, this is summed up with the by-line, “we make great art”. Arts Project Australia’s staff also attest to this focus on the quality of the art, for instance referring to “a serious arts practice” (Anderson & Bigby, 2020, p. 4). All too often, the practices of artists in such studios are dismissed as recreational or therapeutic. This reveals deep-seated prejudices that resonate with a medical model of disability. Because the artists have an intellectual disability, people assume that art is somehow “fixing” them.

The directors of Creative Growth once wrote, “art leads the way ... We are not art therapists, but something very therapeutic happens in our studio” (Di Maria, 2015, p. 7) When art leads the way, when we focus on what is being made and how—the magic and colour, symbolism and feeling, connections and collaborations—the complexity of the social impact of such places becomes apparent. It is experienced not just by the artists with intellectual disabilities, but by all those who come into their orbit.

Art leads the way. Here, I will investigate this statement a little further through the story of Thom Roberts¹, an artist I have worked closely with during my doctoral research at Studio A.

Thom Roberts is an artist

Studio A’s artistic director Gabrielle Mordy remembers encountering Thom Roberts for the first time back in 2006, on the platform at Hornsby train station in Sydney’s north (Mordy, 2018). Unlike the other commuters, Thom was engaged in a performance for the trains. He carefully positioned a collection of small sculptures along the edge of the platform, then stepped back with a broad smile. As trains flew by, he waved his arms and yelled “silvery” before station guards appeared and encouraged him to move on. Gabrielle, an artist herself and studying fine arts and anthropology at university, immediately recognised Thom’s work as a happening, a spontaneous site-specific piece of performance art. Clearly, the station guards did not. And nor did the other commuters that day, who stared from a distance (Mordy, 2018).

Back in 2006, Thom would not have called himself an artist. He was simply doing something that he loved. He was simply expressing his deep fascination with trains.² However, Gabrielle realised that Thom could benefit from a different audience, an audience who might also see the art in Thom’s seemingly unusual actions. She has spent the past 15 years pursuing opportunities for Thom, and a small group of other similarly talented makers: establishing collaborations, negotiating contracts, and securing commissions to exhibit work in galleries, museums, and other “platforms” across Australian and internationally (Mordy, 2018).

For Thom, this has had a profound personal effect. For example, his mother spoke to me about Thom's transformation as a matter of, quite literally, moving from the periphery of a room to its centre. Going out anywhere with other people, he would once have been so far to the perimeter he might even be behind the door. These days he commands the crowd at art events and is a vital member of the Studio A collective. New visitors to the studio will be taken on a personal tour by Thom, during which he introduces them to the other artists and staff—his friends and colleagues. Most have an alter ego as a train from the Sydney rail network. Becoming a train is one sign of belonging within the studio community.

In 2019, Thom's portraits of people as trains, and trains as people, were exhibited as part of The National, a biennial survey exhibition celebrating the best of contemporary Australian Art (see [Figure 1](#)). His paintings were blown up big at the entry to Carriageworks, a prestigious multi-arts centre in the former Eveleigh Railway Workshops in Redfern, Sydney. It is a place Thom refers to as a bedroom for trains. His images there were joyful and intriguing. They lit up that space, offering a little glimpse into Thom's world. People often stared from a distance, but in wonder and appreciation.

These days Thom readily tells those who meet him that he is an artist and a country express train.

Encounters through art

Let's return again to the quote I took from Matarosso at the beginning of this text: "it is in the act of creativity that empowerment lies, and through sharing creativity that understanding and social inclusiveness are promoted". Thom Roberts' story is a compelling example of this. He was given the space and support to make art in a way that speaks true to his interests and innate creativity, empowering him to become an artist. Beyond the personal impact of this transformation, there have been ripple effects as his creative work has been shared in all kinds of ways; from long-term collaborations with other artists to fleeting exchanges in galleries and other public spaces. As Anderson and Bigby (2020) also affirm in their analysis of Arts Project Australia, this goes well beyond narrow conceptualisations of "community participation" or "social inclusion" for people with intellectual disabilities.

One way of understanding the social impact of Thom's practice might be through the concept of "convivial encounter"—a type of friendly interaction between strangers that can occur during the course of urban life, in public and shared spaces like community gardens or museums (Bigby & Wiesel, 2019). Though often brief, such encounters between people with and without intellectual disabilities can allow us to step out of fixed identities and explore points of commonality. Unfortunately, they are not the norm (Wiesel et al., 2013).

On the platform at Hornsby station back in 2006, Gabrielle stood witness to Thom's performance for the trains and recognised it as something remarkable and intriguing. That moment of convivial encounter sparked a relationship that has spanned over 15 years. However, the responses of other commuters and station guards was more exclusionary, signalling that Thom was not welcome because of his difference (Wiesel



Figure 1. Thom Roberts *Counts Trains*—The National: New Australian Art, Carriageworks, March 2019, 18 resin coated polyester fabric banners. Courtesy of Studio A.

et al., 2013). Step forward to the present and Thom's difference is part of what makes his creative work so compelling—it offers us an insight into a world where trains and people are intimately interconnected, for example. Of course, there is the risk that Thom's difference might be exoticized or otherwise misunderstood when his work is exhibited. This is another place where the staff of supported studios have a role to play in ensuring that work is shared ethically, and that meanings and contexts are articulated in a way that does justice to the nuanced worlds of the makers.

Finally, the true power of Thom's work lies in the points of commonality it uncovers. His paintings, performances, animations, and installations have the potential to precipitate encounters based on a shared appreciation of the magic and mystery and playfulness and possibility of art.

Notes

1. Thom was born Robert Smith, but changed his name to Thom Roberts about a decade ago. Whenever he visits the Art Gallery of New South Wales he will gleefully point out the paintings by Tom Roberts, an artist famous for his renditions of the Australian landscape and for founding the Heidelberg School in the late nineteenth century.
2. Psychiatrist and scientist Moreno de Luca Moreno-De-Luca (2020) recently wrote and recorded a song that pays homage to the radiant inner worlds of people on the autism spectrum, who often have an intense interest in weird and wonderful things from trains and outer space, to quantum physics and penguins. He writes: "I have seen firsthand the breathtaking results of many of those intense interests and how they can be simultaneously revitalizing and consuming" (p. 1592).

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