



# Connecting with and through art

Arts engagement for  
liveable communities





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# Connecting with and through art

## Overview

Arts engagement programs for people with dementia are increasingly part of program planning in art galleries and museums in Australia and overseas. The format and content often varies according to local needs and resources. This report provides an overview of a project and research study to explore how arts engagement programs can be developed for people living with dementia using the resources of a public gallery, reaching out into community spaces, and extending art viewing and art making practices. The project and research study used an iterative participatory approach, engaging with a range of people and organisations in the community, to further develop an existing successful art and dementia program at The Art Gallery of New South Wales (The Gallery) to extend its reach and impact. The *Arts Engagement for Liveable Communities (AECL)* project engaged with over 300 attendees, and 12 organisations over fourteen months. The project and research took place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-21, prior to any physical distancing regulations. At this time there was already recognition that it was not always possible for all potential participants to attend The Gallery, and consideration was needed with regard to how to take the engagement to the community.

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## Key Findings

- Arts engagement programs are needed in the community, in galleries, community centres, aged care facilities and in homes;
- The demand for arts engagement outstrips program delivery in Australia, in galleries and the community;
- Further funding and support is needed.
- Arts engagement creates a sense of connection and combats social isolation;
- Programs need to be ongoing rather than project based to reach further into the community to overcome loneliness;
- Getting people to and from the Gallery and facilitators to outreach programs needs careful organisation and funding;
- The *Hub* model used for the AECL project builds a community network that allows for knowledge transfer;
- A framework was developed for transferability of programs to other communities (e.g. Palliative Care);
- Mentoring approaches build confidence leading to individuals discovering their own interests and art 'practice';
- Skills and techniques can be taught according to individual needs, rather than a skill-focussed approach;
- AELC created opportunities for joy and 'in the moment pleasure' for people living with dementia and their broader communities;
- Audiences want experiences that provide meaningful engagement and connect them to others and art;
  - Art viewing engages people in meaningful conversation about what is important in their own lives.



## Context

In Australia and overseas, federal, state and local governments and local governing bodies are increasingly recognising that funding both public institutions and arts projects in the community can connect people, support individual and community wellbeing, and make life more 'liveable' [2, 8].

In the last decade there has been a worldwide growth in specialised arts engagement and access programs in museums and galleries. The sector is increasingly developing inclusive programming to understand and address the needs and wants of diverse audiences and visitors, and to make public collections more broadly available. The Art Gallery of New South Wales

(AGNSW) has embraced inclusive programming approaches with a wide range of offerings.

In 2009, AGNSW ran a successful pilot arts engagement project for people living with dementia. Following this funding was secured from individual benefactors and corporate sponsors to establish the *Art and Dementia* program. In 2016, the program was evaluated showing the impact on wellbeing and recognising an increasing demand, from the community, for such programs [5]. As a result, AGNSW access program producer Danielle Gullotta worked with arts and health researcher Dr Gail Kenning to explore how The Gallery's existing program could be developed and have a greater reach.





The *Arts Engagement for Liveable Communities* (AELC) project was funded by New South Wales (NSW) Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) as part of their *Liveable Communities* program. The project engaged with individual members of the public, groups and organisations, artists, made connections between communities, and connected people with art. The program engaged with ‘art lovers’ and people just beginning to ‘discover’ art.

The project reviewed arts engagement programs in Australia and overseas to understand how they catered to local conditions and what needs they addressed. They included The Museum of Modern Art, New York, which set up the first art and

dementia program in 2006; the first program set up in Australia at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; and the innovative work of *the* (self-titled) *inclusive museum*, Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven, Netherlands, which uses robots in the gallery to enable remote viewing for people with dementia.

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Connecting with and through art is beneficial for the health and wellbeing of older people and people living with dementia and their carers. It provides opportunities for meaningful engagement, social connection, supports positivity and improves self-esteem [1, 2, 4, 5, 9-11].

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# Arts Engagement for Liveable Communities

## The Hub Concept

The *Arts Engagement for Liveable Communities* project engaged in iterative, participatory, processes to find out what was needed, where, and how arts engagement could be extended beyond existing models. It began with a brainstorming session facilitated by The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TASCI) hosted by FACS, to challenge all assumptions about existing arts engagement models. As a result, AGNSW was conceived of as a *hub* linking to a range of project partners and five areas were identified for development.

- The inclusion of art making activities to support sensory engagement.
- Outreach engagement in the community.
- A focus on promoting peer to peer social connection and engagement through art.
- Establishing resources to support these activities
- An evaluation of the project, the programs and the development process.

## Approach

The project used an iterative approach drawing on participatory action research and grounded practical theory approaches. In addition, the project used a 'soft developmental evaluation approach' which drew on all available feedback throughout the project to immediately inform its development. Methods used included discussion and debriefings with all engaged in delivering the project and consultation with experts and external organisations. Formal evaluation took place in

the form of observation of attendees, carers, facilitators and artists. Audio and video recordings were used for post event analysis and questionnaires were given all participants.

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From four (two people living with dementia with two carers) to 26 people (including four carers) attended each program. They included people from residential care facilities, community centres, and members of the general public and people who did not speak English.

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The dedicated *Liveable Communities* programs at AGNSW were scheduled over ten sessions. Four outreach programs were also conducted and four consultation programs with communities at Hazelhurst Arts Centre, Holdsworth Community, Wollongong Art Gallery, the Lower blue mountains community centre and students from The Illawarra Grammar School (TIGS). A collaborative event was undertaken with Abel Tasman aged care village to coincide with an artists in residency project, featuring drag queens the 'Motel Sisters', organised by Information and Cultural Exchange (I.C.E <https://ice.org.au/>) [12].

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Overall, the program engaged with over 300 people including in excess of 250 people living with dementia and carers, art galleries and organisation staff and attendees, and school students. A core group of about 50 people became regular attendees.

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## Art viewing in The Gallery

A range of artworks were selected for viewing with subject matter that included food, family life, sex, war combat and the self. The works were selected to encourage associations in relation to the self, objects, landscapes and activities. They encouraged conversations about the paintings and people's own experiences and feelings. Two facilitators accompanied each group. Larger groups were often divided into smaller groups to ensure that everyone had equal opportunity to talk and be listened to. Groups looked at two or three paintings depending on attendee's responses to the works selected and the time available.

## Artmaking in The Gallery

Initially, white melamine tables were set up for groups of eight per table. The tables had no table covering. The chairs were placed around the tables and a piece of white A4 paper was placed on the table in front of each chair. Crayons and pencils were placed to the right of the paper. After waiting for everyone to arrive the artists stood outfront and began. 'Today we are going to...' holding up reproductions and talking about drawing and making collages based on the works viewed. This conformed with what was often seen as best practice for people living with dementia. That is, while stimulation is needed, too many objects and 'clutter' can over-stimulate and cause confusion [3]. It was however too formal and people appeared timid of engaging with the materials in front of them.

The second art making session was changed significantly. While attendees viewed

the artworks in the gallery, art materials were set up in the room where the artmaking would take place. While dementia care practice and literature recommend avoiding over stimulation and simplifying the environment, the environment was made more inviting and exciting with brightly coloured tablecloths, objects and images placed on the tables.

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Everything placed on the table was related to the artworks that the attendees had viewed. The aim was to create associations — not *reminders* or memory *prompts* — between what they were seeing in front of them and what they had viewed in The Gallery.

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The A4 white paper (from the earlier session) was now replaced with non-standard sized paper of quality and texture, and the pencils and tools for making were no longer laid out in lines, but in amongst the artefacts and objects, casually placed on and next to the paper. As soon as the attendees entered the space they were greeted by the artist, shown to a seat and served refreshments. There was a different energy in the room compared to the day before, as the objects and materials on the tables created chatter and curiosity. Attendees touched, moved and fiddled with the objects in front of them. The artists sat *alongside* showing how people might work with the materials in front of them. Initially, there was a great deal of noise, but this subsided as people began to get involved in the making process.



## In the community

One of the main aims of the AELC project was to explore the extent to which arts engagement activities were wanted and needed in the community.

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The logistics of how to *do* arts engagement in the community, needed to be explored. For example, where programs could be held, who could facilitate them, how artworks could be viewed and how art could be made in community space with limited resources.

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The consultation process involved engaging with community centres, residential care facilities, academics, local government organisations, and local galleries. It also involved doing presentations and talks in the

community and inviting the community to present and talk at AGNSW. In addition, it explored how AGNSW could partner with organisations to create sustainable programs by being a primary resource for facilitators, training, knowledge transfer and resources for art viewing and artmaking. A key consideration for working in the community was how AGNSW resources, which included reproductions of artworks and materials for artmaking, could be transported by the artists and facilitators. For example, in the gallery art viewing took place in front of the actual artworks, and while life-sized reproductions could provide good viewing experiences, the feasibility of transporting them needed to be addressed.





## AGNSW Resources

### **Art sets**

AGNSW produced a series of Art Sets, available both on the website and as a series of printed cards, to support art viewing and making at home, in community centres and in residential facilities. The sets consist of carefully curated images supported by information about the artwork and the artists. In addition, a set of themed questions act as prompts to start everyday conversations.

### **Reproductions**

The project team worked with design staff at AGNSW to explore how good quality art reproductions could be made that could be transported to a range of community spaces. Initially, reproductions were mounted on foam board, which meant they could easily be carried. During the arts engagement they were placed on small easels in front of the gathered group to create a 'gallery' viewing experience and could be referred to while artmaking. But the small reproductions were hard for some to see and encouraged one-on-one discussions rather than the group engagement that usually occurred in The Gallery.

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To ensure people could clearly see the artworks and to promote group discussion, the art reproductions were printed 'life size' on silk. They could be folded and easily transported.

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### **Magnetic collage kits**

Art materials, such as glue, paint, pencils and scissors were not always allowed in community centres, residential care facilities or in AGNSW galleries, because of the potential risk to people or artworks. To overcome this magnetic collage kits were developed made from 'off-the-shelf' magnetic boards, from a large stationery outlet, and objects with magnets attached. The concept was initially developed for a participatory design project by an AELC project lead working with people with dementia in residential care [6, 7]. The kits were relatively inexpensive to produce, a good size, and allowed for a wide range of materials to be used. Photographic images, paper, fabrics, threads, and natural flowers or leaves were used to create still life collages. They could be placed and easily rearranged, allowing people



with limited dexterity to engage. A frame was added to 'finish' the artwork, and text was printed on magnetic paper so the works could be given titles. Each collage making program included a viewing of people's work, inspiring further discussion

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The magnetic collage kits aimed at overcoming the difficulty of engaging in artmaking in front of artworks; having 'messy' art materials around; being art materials that were easily transportable; overcoming creative paralysis or insecurities about not being able to make art; and for some a first step in artmaking before using other materials and techniques.

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## Arts Engagement for Liveable Communities

After consulting with communities and partner organisations, developing resources and based on prior experience of arts engagement programs, the AELC project adopted a mentoring approach to art viewing and art making. The aim was to develop individual interests, rather than teach skills. Sitting alongside people meant skills could be transferred to build confidence, expand knowledge, and support individual abilities.

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Art viewing was used as inspiration for artmaking. Individuals were encouraged to develop their own interests and develop a personal art practice. Artists sat *alongside* offering support with art materials as needed.

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## Glimpses of artmaking and viewing

### ***'Rodney'***

Rodney had younger onset dementia. He worked in a self-contained way. Rather than making collages like others in the room, he began drawing around the shapes, and then drawing perfect circles freehand. He was very precise trying to make them as accurate as possible. He began to talk about *his* publishing—Picking up the pencils and drawing had prompted a recollection of an earlier time in his life. The carers accompanying him were not aware he had been a graphic designer or he had an interest in drawing.

### ***'Maureen'***

Maureen claimed that she had never drawn before. She carefully drew a shell placed in front of her. She was becoming noticeably frustrated with her drawing until she asked how to make her drawing look more 'real'. An artist sat alongside and showed her how to add shade and light to make the object look more 3-dimensional). She carefully listened to advice then continued working quietly by herself immersed in the process.

### ***'Anita'***

Anita had Aphasia and was not able to speak. She worked with her husband and her daughter on a drawing, carefully painting the hair of a woman with soft brush strokes. She was completely immersed in the activity. The three of



them enjoyed the activity and doing something together.

### ***'May' and 'Edward'***

May and Edward attended The Gallery together on several occasions. Edward had little mobility, was primarily non-verbal, and had a limited attention span. After completing her own artwork, May looked to see what Edward was doing. She was delighted to see he had written his name and hers. She explained that it had been several years, since Edward last wrote and he had a problem remembering names. He continued to write his name and hers, and that of their daughters. Both May and Edward were visually pleased.



### ***'Alana'***

In The Gallery Alana had become fixated on the hat on a portrait of a woman. She appeared to know the name for the type of hat and how it should be worn. The facilitator chatted with her. 'Alana' carefully explained how the veil fitted onto the hat and how the fabric was folded. She remembered her experience as a milliner.

### ***'Ted' and 'Mavis',***

Ted and Mavis were regular attendees. Ted was always impeccably dressed sporting berets and hats. He never looked distracted or bored and listened attentively. He was initially hesitant of talking. But when asked a question he responded immediately. As his confidence grew, he spoke more frequently, introducing new ideas to the group. The discussion in The Gallery focussed on a portrait of a person wearing a hat. Conversation was redirected to Ted's lovely hat and clothes. He enjoyed the attention and the acknowledgement of his identity because of his clothes.

### **Community programs**

Community-based programs were time and labour intensive because of the travelling, setting up, and the need for at least two facilitators to be present. It became apparent that setting up programs in the community meant the program needed to be flexible. For example, lighting, acoustics and available

space was often not ideal. The length of time for art viewing and art making also needed to be adapted. The community-based programs often became more informal and missed the 'feel' of being in The Gallery. But they had the advantage for some of not having to travel far and being familiar with the surroundings.

### **Discussion**

There were primarily three aims of the AELC project and the development of the AGNSW Art and Dementia program; to introduce art making and support the development of an art practice; to explore how the successful AGNSW program could operate in the community and be a sustainable activity; to develop resources to support arts engagement and making.

The early challenges were in working out how many artworks were to be viewed and how the program should be. Also, how to get people from the gallery to the artmaking space while retaining their enthusiasm for the artworks and being conducive to making. In the community challenges included how to get artists to the community space, how to get viewing and making materials there, and how to operate in spaces not conducive to group discussion or art making. In overcoming the logistics, there were some 'breakthrough moments', unexpected responses and behaviours and moments of joy.



### What Next?

Formal evaluations were undertaken through questionnaires, real-time and audio and video post-event observation, and interviews. Researchers observed verbal and non-verbal interactions. The findings are now being published.

The project demonstrated a keen appetite for more arts engagement in The Gallery and in the community. It was not been possible to engage with all communities and groups that wanted to be involved. Many people want to attend programs and are willing to train to facilitate them. While the *AELC* project focused on arts access for people living

with dementia it is apparent that the model of engagement used is appropriate for a range of communities.

Having demonstrated the need in the community and how AGNSW is a successful hub, the next steps are to develop a model for sustainability. It was expected that funding would be made available for this, but due to political and economic change funding was not forthcoming. The project is continuing with in-kind resources, but at a significantly slower pace. The art making component of The Gallery program has continued with philanthropic funding.



## Project partners

### Community engagement

- Holdsworth Community
- Hazelhurst Arts Centre
- Wollongong Art Gallery
- The Illawarra Grammar School
- Lower Blue Mountains Neighbourhood
- Residential Care facilities in Sydney and Wollongong
- Salvation Army
- Central Coast Council

### Presentations and media impact

- Daughters care place
- Dutch Design week
- Laugh Symposium
- AGNSW NSW Seniors festival
- AGNSW art and health conference
- National Gallery Australia
- CHI Montreal/Denver
- AGNSW Dementia Awareness
- Cardiff metropolitan University

### Development of resources

- Framework for arts engagement
- Training with Dementia Australia, Wollongong Art Gallery
- Talking with Artists
- Consulting with advisors
- Magnetic collage boards
- Art sets

### Organizations

- Dementia Australia
- Black Dog Institute,
- Salvation Army,
- Holdsworth Community
- Hazelhurst Arts Centre.

### People

- Katherine Boydell
- Judy Proudfoot
- Elios
- The Motel Sisters

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