

Crafting Language: Dementia, Community and Play

by Tabatha Andrews

Abstract

“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>

*I don't know what to do
I want to go home
I can sit here but
I don't seem happy anymore
I don't know what to do
I want to but
I can't any more
I want to lay
I don't know when it'll be
I want it so let me have it
Don't make it so hard for me
O World, I don't know what to do
I want to see my sunset
I want it as promised
I'm waiting for the hour
I want to see my sunset good*

Sung by a woman in a nursing home – recorded by John Killickⁱ

I am an artist who is interested in exploring our sensory relationship with our environment. We live in a world where vision is dominant and my work calls on the more primitive senses of touch, hearing and haptic perception, searching for a state of synaesthesia – an experience between the senses. To do this, I often make unsettling and disorientating work – yet in 2015 I was invited to take a very different approach. I was awarded the First@108 Public Art Awardⁱⁱ to make two sculptures on the theme of Memory for the dementia wards of Chelsea and Westminster Hospital in London. The challenge was to create a sense of community on the ward, to help people who had been disconnected from their environment feel at home and to involve their carers in interacting in new ways. The first sculpture, *The Dispensary*ⁱⁱⁱ, forms the subject of this paper.

The Dispensary is a mobile 'cabinet of curiosities' that 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 movement, and ultimately enhance cognitive function. Part tool-cabinet, part dressing table, bureau or fridge, the sculpture appeals to conscious and unconscious memory, reminding us of the gestures involved in everyday rituals and providing a space for exchange and sharing.



The Dispensary: mobile 'cabinet of curiosities'.

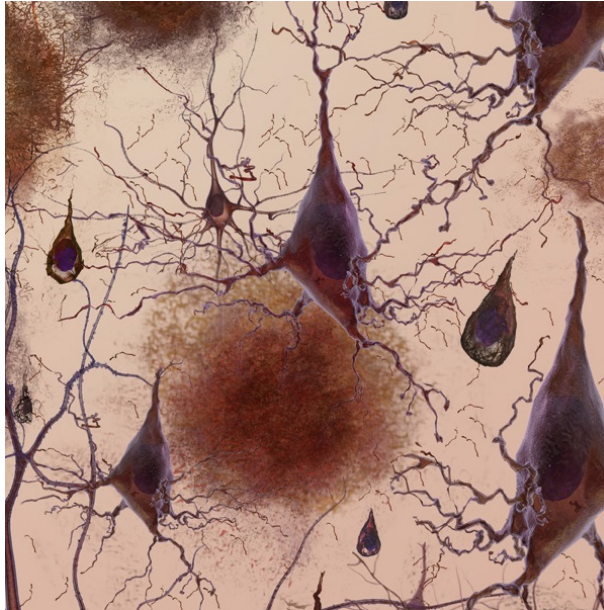
In making this work, I collaborated with two unusual communities: the patients of Chelsea and Westminster, and the woodturners of Devon and Cornwall. For the purpose of this paper I am going to focus on how patient creativity, workshop-based interaction and woodturners' skills contributed to the making of the work, creating a new kind of community that encourages communication. I will also explore the relationships this work sets up between well-making, craft, personal agency and memory.

Memory and Forgetting

"There is a goddess of Memory, Mnemosyne; but none of Forgetting. Yet there should be, as they are twin sisters, twin powers, and walk on either side of us, disputing for sovereignty over us and who we are, all the way to death". Richard Holmes^{iv}

"My eyes tear for no reason and I explode, when in better times I might have laughed. Send me away. I cannot stand to live in this dying body with its floating alphabet. I do not want to see the life of my future." De Baggio^v

I will attempt to simplify this paper by grouping people with Alzheimer's and Dementia under the blanket term 'people with dementia'. The real story is of course far more complex. Scientists do not know for sure what causes Alzheimer's but we know that clusters of abnormal, beta-amyloid proteins called 'plaques' build up between nerve cells in the brain, blocking normal communication and causing cell death, while 'neurofibrillary tangles' foul things up in the neurons. Alzheimer's is incurable and irreversible.



Plaques and tangles: Image courtesy GEN

Dementia is a set of symptoms that can include memory loss and difficulties with thinking, problem solving or language. It can be reversible in some forms, or even temporary, and is caused when diseases such as Alzheimer's or strokes damage the brain. Amazingly, however, dementia can lead to people discovering a creative self they did not know existed, becoming artists, poets and musicians later in life. Instead of seeing their brains as disintegrating, we could instead think of a kind of transformation or 'reformation' taking place. Richard Senelick, a neurologist from the Rehabilitation Institute in San Antonio, writes:

But dementia and aging do not affect all parts of the brain equally. Alzheimer's disease, especially, does not affect the entire brain at once but starts in the part of the brain that creates new memories. Most people know that as we age we can remember with vivid clarity things from the past, while the events of a few hours earlier may be a total blur. Depending on which part of the brain is affected, different skills will be preserved or impaired in different types of dementia. This gradual reformation is what may allow the emergence of artistic abilities (...) Dementia preferentially attacks the frontal and temporal parts of the brain at first, only involving the "artistic" parietal and occipital lobes later in the disease^{vi}.

Furthermore, people with dementia do not necessarily lose their sense of self – indeed they can become closer to it, in creativity, gesture, taste, sense of humour and habits.

*Sometimes I picture myself
like a candle.
I used to be a candle about eight feet tall - burning bright.
Now, everyday I lose
a little bit of me.
Someday the candle will be
very small.
but the flame will be
just as bright.*

Barb Noon (with permission) working with John Killick^{vii}.

Linguistic pathways in the brain are often lost, but there are other ways of accessing memory and encouraging communication– through sensory engagement with the world.

“Dementia strips people down to the essence of their being and frees them to be in more direct touch with their emotions. They communicate with greater authenticity than our customary conventional reliance on controlled emotional expression.” Gibson^{viii}

Different cultures have differing approaches to dementia. In the UK there tends to be a reliance on ‘dumbing down’ with drugs when things get tricky, rather than interaction and stimulation. Sometimes people with dementia can be patronised or ignored and end up confused, frustrated or upset. People withdraw from their environment as a result – we are all familiar with the image of a person with dementia sitting slumped with their head down, seemingly absent. But in Japan, people with dementia wash each other as if engaging in a kind of celebration. In Holland there is a movement for ‘relational clowning’ with dementia sufferers, so that humour becomes a real force for interaction and ‘waking people up.’ In India, age- related memory loss is understood as a ‘shedding’, the fourth stage of life – in which you become a new person. Not surprisingly, recent studies show that psychosocial factors can contribute to the development of dementia;

“Now we have learned that the way we treat people with dementia may be as significant in the way they present as any brain damage that may have occurred.” John Killick^{ix}

Crucially, we tend to forget that only a small percentage of the human brain processes verbal communication. We communicate largely through body language; gesture, touch, facial expression and so on; with the tone of our voice becoming secondary and verbal communication a tiny part. The body remembers long after language has left. People with severe dementia can be great at physical tasks like drumming, dancing, laying the table or catching a tennis ball despite being unable to interact verbally. *The Dispensary* explores how the body retains the memory of things, and uses this tacit knowledge as a way of finding new pathways of communication in the brain.

Purposeful Play and Being In the Moment

“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” Johan Huizinga^x

The Dispensary is an exercise in non-verbal expression – in particular, touch and gesture, inspired by a sense of play. Touch is, after all, the primary sense experienced by the child. I began to research the Montessori Method early on in the project as I remembered how these sculptural games created a sense of calm, satisfaction and concentration in my toddlers, while tuning their linguistic, spatial and haptic capabilities.

The Montessori Method is a technique of purposeful play used in young children’s learning that has been shown to be highly effective in the mental and physical stimulation of people with dementia. This method is a constructivist model in which students learn by working with materials, experiencing freedom within limits rather than being given direct instruction. Inspired by the research of Susan Slocum Dyer and Tom and Karen Brenner into Montessori for the elderly, I began to explore the relationship of play to memory and language acquisition. It is our conscious memory that is most affected by dementia (the storage and processing of facts, events, and language). As with the Montessori method, I am interested in working with our unconscious or ‘procedural’ memory, of which muscle memory is a part, and creating a situation that celebrates ‘being in the moment’.



The Dispensary with some of its optical-tactile sense-based objects and hand-wound musical movements.

I later discovered the pioneering work of Friedrich Froebel, who started the first Kindergartens in Germany in the eighteenth century, and believed 'Play.. is not mere sport; it possesses high seriousness and deep meaning...'^{xi}Froebel was a crystallographer who understood that there were no boundaries between our environment, mathematics and art. Norman Brosterman writes of Froebel's education practice in *Inventing Kindergarten*^{xii}; 'A chair might become numbers, numbers art, and art either or both...Children could make anything they saw, perceived or imagined, and while doing so would enter the world – and it would enter them.' Play, therefore, is transformative; biologically and spiritually purposeful as well as pleasurable. Froebel saw that what separates us from other beings is that we alter our environment. Play enables us to problem-solve, articulating the relationship between word and thing, and it literally expands our brains. The human brain is great at designing and manipulating tools, but also allows us to visualise in three dimensions and imagine a different future.

For Johan Huizinga, author of *Homo Ludens*^{xiii}, one of the most important aspects of play is that it is fun. He identifies five essential characteristics of play:

1. Play is free, is in fact freedom.
2. Play is not "ordinary" or "real" life.
3. Play is distinct from "ordinary" life both as to locality and duration.
4. Play creates order, is order. Play demands order absolute and supreme.
5. Play is connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it

Furthermore, when play is at its most successful (and purely for its own sake) we are able to achieve a state of 'flow' in which we are completely immersed, focussed and present in the moment. Humans are creative beings and our brains are designed to play: without it we become depressed.

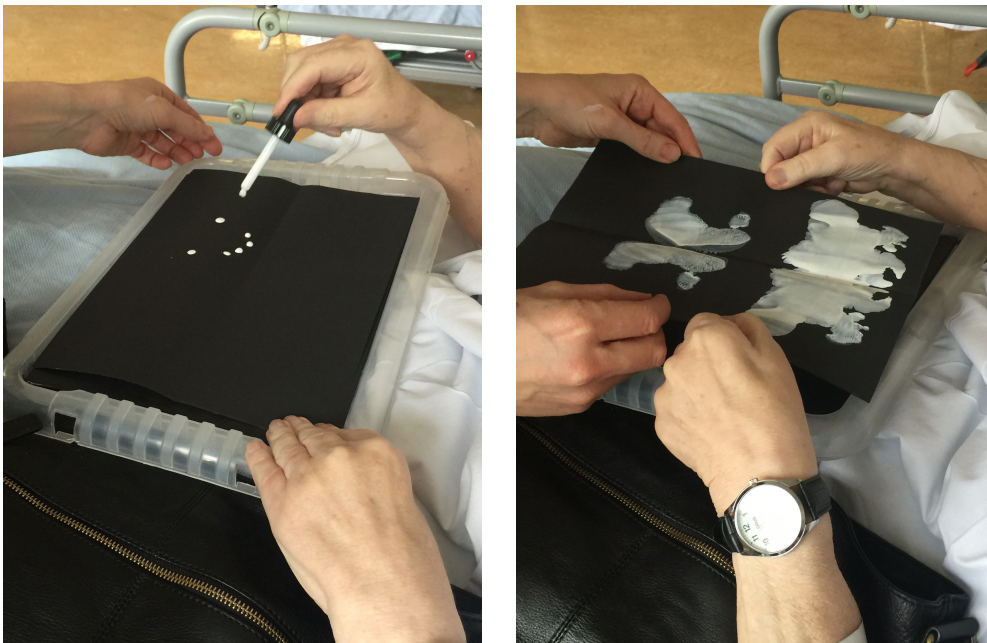
On the Ning Nang Nong: Building Language

"You must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on." Samuel Beckett^{xiv}

Over the first few months of the project, I ran workshops with the patients, combining poetry readings with a series of simple sculptural interactions. My aim was to have a largely non-verbal conversation with them, and to engage in a process of exchange. I brought objects to the patients that demanded to be animated; a small glass spinning top, door handles still joined at their core, a variety of balls (tennis ball, tactile wooden ball) and simple three dimensional puzzles. Through rolling, spinning, rotating, twisting, these objects came alive. Patients' agility and responses were varied, but the glass-spinning top was particularly successful in the way it seemed to 'hold time' and focus attention, seeming still whilst in movement.

The importance of slowing down my language and not over complicating these encounters with direct or complex questions cannot be over emphasized. I discovered how essential it is to communicate with people at their own level, sitting next to them or even kneeling on the floor while engaging. Touch was comforting for some patients and I took a pot of homemade lavender cream to rub on their hands, giving pleasure in the sense of smell. Rather than telling, I was showing.

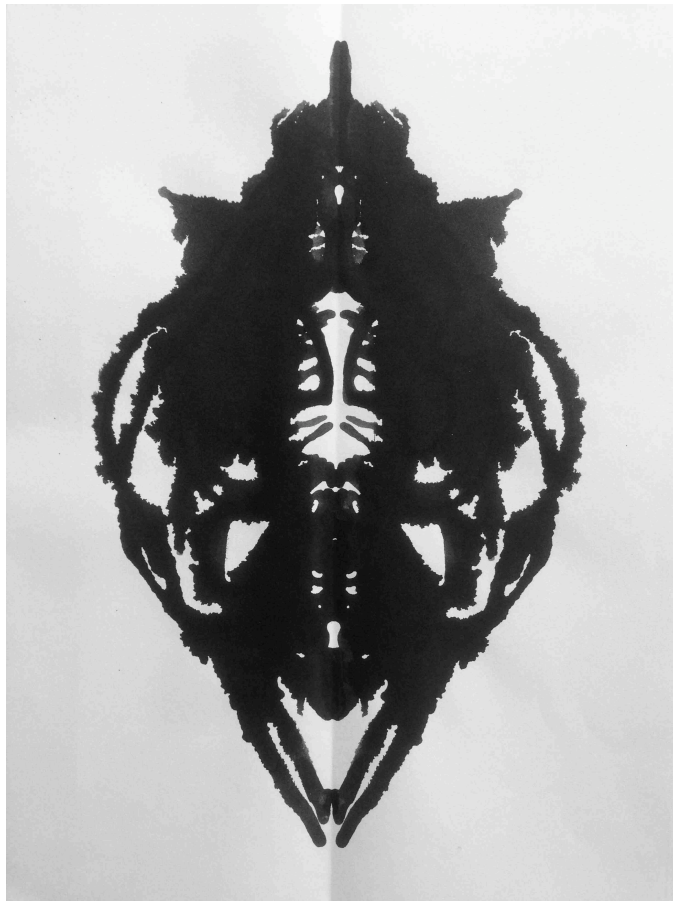
Each patient made Rorschach ink blots using a variety of inks on white or black paper. The Rorschach test is a psychological test used to examine people's personality characteristics and 'thought disorders' (disorganised thinking as evidenced by speech). The test has been largely disproved in the UK as pseudoscience, but has been used effectively in recent neuropsychological investigations into dementia, problem solving and linguistic capability. I was excited by how such a simple making process can produce results of complexity and strangeness – and so were the patients. As with the spinning tops, the symmetry of the images creates a sense of order and stillness yet movement held in tension. After finishing their 'drawing' I asked the patient what their image reminded them of. This was a great opportunity for taking time to talk at whatever level.



On the ward: making the Rorschach ink blots



Rorschach Blot by Alexandra



Rorschach Blot by Edna

Poetry readings were unexpectedly successful, though sometimes it took time to find a poem meaningful to that person. People loved the rhythm, rhyme and musicality of the poems, and would join in if they knew them; even be moved to tears, as if hearing the words was a release. In contrast to advice I had been given from many angles not to confuse, 'mix things up' and turn the world upside down, nonsense poetry made some people laugh and find pleasure in the moment. Here is one of them:

*On the Ning Nang Nong
Where the Cows go Bong!
and the monkeys all say BOO!
There's a Nong Nang Ning
Where the trees go Ping!
And the tea pots jibber jabber joo.
On the Nong Ning Nang
All the mice go Clang
And you just can't catch 'em when they do!
So its Ning Nang Nong
Cows go Bong!
Nong Nang Ning
Trees go Ping
Nong Ning Nang
The mice go Clang
What a noisy place to belong
is the Ning Nang Ning Nang Nong!!*

Spike Milligan^{xv}

A primitive sense of play and closeness to the moment when language and rhythm first became accessible to us as children is present in these poems. As in a Bach counterpoint, there is at once a sense of repetition and change. There is no need to remember where or when one heard them; they exist out of meaning, narrative, time and place, making words become pure music and chiming rhythm.

At times of trauma, our perception of time and 'being in the world' can become disconnected; sequence, syntax and rhythm can become broken.

*I felt a Cleaving in my Mind —
As if my Brain had split —
I tried to match it — Seam by Seam —
But could not make them fit.*

*The thought behind, I strove to join
Unto the thought before —
But Sequence ravelled out of Sound
Like Balls — upon a Floor.*

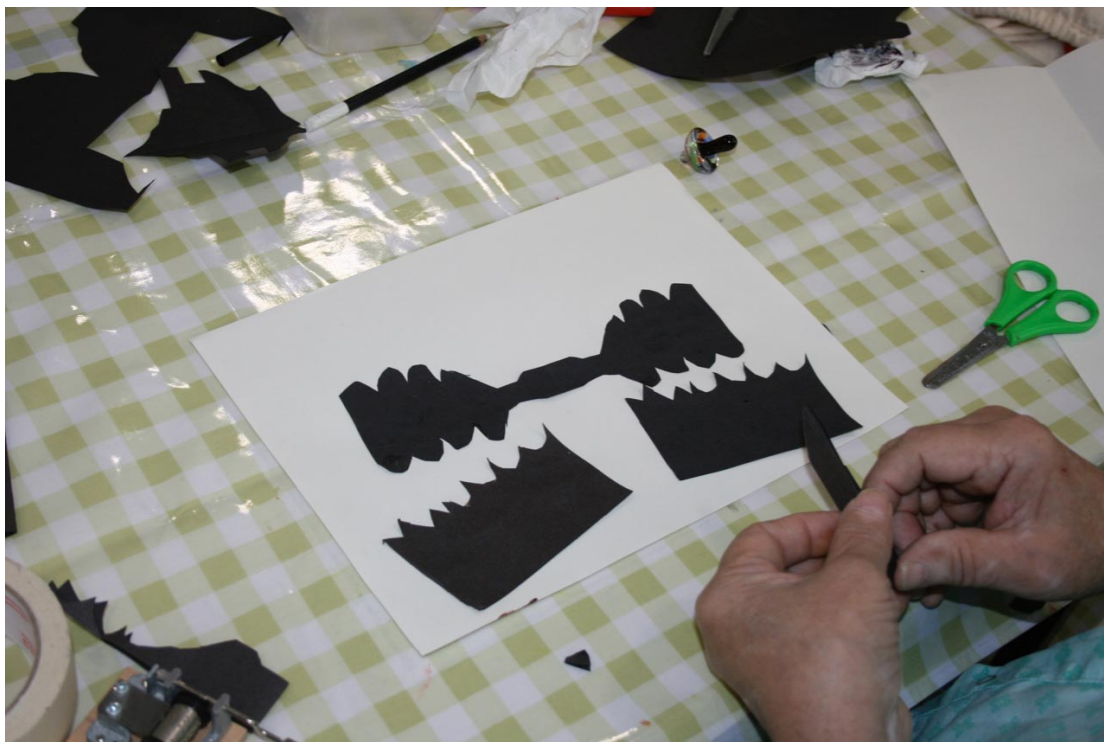
Emily Dickinson^{xvi}

This is when rhyme has the ability to 'hold' time; and as we hear consonance and dissonance, repetition and difference in language, we engage with the push and pull of the word forming in the mind and body, the memory becoming thing. Rhyme can create process and movement; it can respond, repeat, or echo across space and time. The poet Denise Riley talks of rhyme creating a chain of stitches in sound, creating sonic links across time and restoring the flow of language for her after the death of her child. Roland Barthes describes the birth of language according to Freud as a child letting go and pulling back a yo-yo; mimicking the presence and absence of the mother. This is the beginning of rhythm in language, forming what Barthes calls 'active listening', for 'listening speaks'.

Corporality of speech, the voice is located at the articulation of body and discourse, and it is in this interspace that listening's back and forth movement might be made^{xvii}.

With one lovely patient, words failed completely, and we drummed out a series of 'call and response' rhythms with our hands, laughing all the way.

The last workshop with patients involved sculptural construction: each participant made an ink blot and then developed these shapes into simple symmetrical cutout collages in black and white paper; explorations of presence and absence that contributed to forms within *The Dispensary*.



Translating the Rorschach blots into symmetrical black and white (absence and presence) cut-out collages.

We then started working with an old fashioned set of children's woodblocks, building imaginary cities. This was hugely popular, inspiring immense focus and satisfaction in the group of men who attended. The process of making inspired discussion, and Alfred Brendel's piano music was a stimulating accompaniment.

Working with the Woodturners: Building Community

I took the Rorschach blots the patients made to the Tavistock Woodturners of Devon and turner David Trewin in Cornwall. At our first meeting, I brought the same objects I had shown the patients and we talked about childhood play, familiar objects and spaces, repetition and the cyclical nature of memory.



Egg cup turned on multiple axes by Mike Edmonds next to Rorschach design

Several of the turners knew someone with dementia and had an innate and often heartfelt understanding of what was needed: something that could be handheld and interacted with safely. Most of them gave their services free of charge. We engaged in a process of discussion and exchange, so that objects grew into structures that stacked, rolled, spun, made percussive sounds or became tactile handles and finials that were attached to the cabinet. I handed the outlines of a few Rorschach blots to the turners and waited to see what would unfold.



Tactile objects from The Dispensary 2016: turnings by Mark Hancock, David Trewin and others.

I chose wood for its resonance, its tactile quality and warmth. It is a natural material very different from the anodyne plastic, vinyl and lino of hospital wards. Different woods have their own personality; varying in weight, grain, texture, smell, colour and history. Olive, walnut, mahogany, oak, ash, burr elm: the process of woodturning involves a kind of magic, exposing the inner structure of a material never seen before. Wood is a container for memory; the turned objects are analogue 'recordings' of the gesture of the wood turner and the imperceptible growth of a tree through time.

Villem Flusser discusses the derivation of the word 'design' in his wonderful book *The Shape of Things*^{xix}. The words design, machine, technology, ars and art are closely related in history. The Greek word for 'art' is *techne*, which is close to *tekton*, 'a carpenter'. The Latin equivalent of *techne* is *ars*, which by extension means 'agility' or 'the ability to turn something to one's advantage', connecting to the notion of turning something in the hand. The word *materia* is the result of a Roman attempt to translate the Greek word for wood, *hyle*, into Latin. *Hyle* is the amorphous matter the artist gives form (Gk *morphe*) to.

At various points in the project I asked the turners why they do what they do. It seems to be an act of well-making for them, in which they discover their own tacit knowledge of form and material. Watching the process of woodturning, I feel it is a kind of choreography of gesture in which the turner engages in a search for perfection. When the lathe is spinning the wood appears liquid, the chisel smoothly articulating a drawn line that seems known before it appears, in a process of recognition of something remembered.

"There are so many stories and experiences that can be brought back by giving people beautiful, natural objects to hold." Tom Brenner^{xx}

In a way, the act of turning one of the objects from *The Dispensary* in the hand is an act of remembering their making. Haptic perception (from Greek *haptós* "palpable", *haptikós* "suitable for touch") means the ability to 'grasp something.' It is different from tactile perception, as it suggests the active exploration of the environment by a moving subject rather than passive contact by a static subject. 'Prehension' is the act of 'grasping something', or the way the body anticipates sensory data in advance of physical action. Those with

memory loss often talk of the panic induced by one's mind being unable to grasp onto something or even of being unable to feel 'now'. As the wood turners imagine the form before they cut it, so we anticipate picking up an object. Raymond Tallis^{xxi} describes prehension as organised into four stages: *anticipation*, in which the hand is shaped in reaching for the glass; *contact*, when the brain acquires sensory information through touch; *language cognition*, in naming what one holds; and *reflection* on what one has done.



Patient exploring elm wood-turned object from The Dispensary.

“..the very categories of language are created by intentional hand actions, so that verbs derive from hand movements, nouns ‘hold’ things as names, and adverbs and adjectives, like hand tools, modify movements and objects. The focus here is particularly on how experiences of touch and grip (...) give language its directive powers.” Armstrong et al., 1995 ^{xxii}



Patient exploring cherry wood-turned stacking object from The Dispensary.

The wooden 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.

The Dispensary: a theatre of memory and re-creation

"A wardrobe's inner space is also intimate space, space that is not open to just anybody" Bachelard^{xxiii}

Public art projects are never without pitfalls. On accepting this commission I was offered two very generous sites in which to make work, both of which fell by the wayside. I decided to approach this situation with humour and began creating my own cabinet to contain the objects on wheels. This way it would not need a site, and could move from bed to bed. I began to collage found images on paper. By combining images of medical furniture with resonant domestic furniture (tool cabinets, bureaux, fridges, dressing tables and so on), structures with personality began to assert themselves:





Collaged images of The Dispensary cabinet in development.

A hacked drop-leaf table was combined with a double-sided, multi-layered cabinet to create a gentle puzzle. Battleship grey on the outside, on opening the doors one is flooded with colour: cadmium orange on one side, phthalo green on the other.



The final form of The Dispensary cabinet.

Though antique latches, handles and bolts are attached and functional, *The Dispensary* is never locked and is accessible at all times of day or night. The work is designed to access patients' bedsides but also accommodates wheelchair users. For a standing person, the doors provide an element of privacy and intimacy.



The Dispensary cabinet with doors opened.

Using repetitive, cyclical movement as a means of accessing memory and maintaining focus and rhythm is central to *The Dispensary*. The rotation of raw wood on the turner's lathe is echoed by the rotation of the cabinet on its swivelling castors, the arcs drawn in space by doors and table-tops as they open and close, and of spinning tops as they spin. These shapes are echoed in varying sizes of holes cut in shelves, spoons and bowls, the elliptical shapes of mirrors, eggs and other tactile objects. A series of mechanical music boxes sit on oak blocks in tiny cupboards acting as resonators for their tunes – 'I Just Called To Say I Love You', 'La Vie En Rose' and other memorable songs. In this way the work speaks of the cyclical nature of memory – through interacting with this environment, the patient not only gains control, but has the opportunity to create, curate and improvise, taking pleasure in the moment and returning to a place of safety and harmony, if only for a short time.



Patient playing with wood-turned object from The Dispensary.

These objects can be seen as relational and sensorial in nature, questioning the relationship between subject and object:

“Suppose, instead, that the artist’s production was not her own encoded expressivity directed towards the other person as spectator, but provided some means for that other person to become conscious of his/her own expressivity, in the role of participant. The roles of ‘artist,’ ‘spectator’ and mediating ‘object’ would all change. Since the object would no longer be a representation, it would have no meaning or structure outside the participant’s manipulation of it in the here-and-now. Its existence would be meaningful only in an intimate relationship between the participants as whole, pluri-sensorial beings. The external shape of this object would no longer have primary importance since it would not be intended exclusively for the eye, nor even for the other senses explicitly defined, but for something vaguer, broader.” Guy Brett on Lygia Clark^{xxiv}

The Dispensary has been activated by many people with dementia as well as their physiotherapists, nurses, theatre practitioners, artists, carers, and families. After a year on the wards at Chelsea and Westminster, the work moved to a specialist Dementia care home in Surrey where it is much loved by the residents.

The Dispensary acts as a non-verbal library, full of a new syntax – a syntax of the patients’ memories manifested through gesture and animated through play. It is also an exploration of the importance of process over product. 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.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ A short film about *The Dispensary* by Liberty Smith can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/249594880> or by visiting <http://www.tabathaandrews.co.uk>
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