



Research report

Playing in the space between art and therapy

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Abstract. *In setting up a new art therapy service at i-psy we were given a unique opportunity to create a program aimed at psychologically strengthening clients by using art for personal growth. This includes cultivating clients' identities as artists, alongside their individual clinical, therapeutic treatment aims. 'i-psy' is an intercultural psychiatric organisation in the Netherlands, specialised in treating clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. The program, which we have called the open atelier (or open-studio) program, culminates in an annual exhibition of our clients' artwork in a commercial gallery, based in central Amsterdam. The art therapy staff organise this event together with experienced art curators who select clients' work to a professional standard. Supporting a transition from the social role of client to artist can be healing for many patients, and art in this form becomes a catalyst for social change. By connecting these two worlds, the gallery becomes a space to promote transformation, transition, encounter and psychological well-being through art.*

Keywords: art therapy, migrant, intercultural, open-studio, gallery, exhibition, client, artist.

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INTRODUCTION**Playing in the space between art and therapy**

"Creativity grows in the fearless spot where ideas bubble. Every creation says: I am not afraid, I am here!"
open-studio artist

"Creativity takes courage"
Henri Matisse

Creating and maintaining the open-studio program eight years ago took courage. It was a new and innovative art therapy treatment in the Netherlands. One of the authors (SD) had worked with art therapy open-studio models in the UK and combined distinct ways of working to suit the therapeutic aims at *i-psy*. It has taken time to introduce to Dutch art therapists and to become an established part of the institution. The art therapy department at *i-psy* theoretically combines various open-studio models. We strive to create a space that offers containment (Bion, 1963) and the possibility for clients to move between process and product, thus facilitating a shift in identity. We find that the open studio empowers and activates our clients. By participating in the program clients inspire and support each other. This social aspect has an important function. It provides clients with the conditions to experiment with and develop social skills and gain more confidence. Alongside their individual or group art therapy, it is possible for clients to use this third form of treatment. Clients are welcome to use a walk-in open studio, which is available to them up to four times a week. Here, they can address

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their therapeutic goals (as defined by *i-psy*) and/or use the space to make a shift towards creating an identity as an artist with the opportunity to exhibit their work in a gallery setting. This creates the conditions through which as therapists, the team facilitates the client in drawing out their fullest potential.

In our view, it is vital that the space is as reliable as possible, which means there is always at least one member of the art therapy team covering the open-studio. This guards the continuity of the program and makes it possible for clients to develop a good enough relationship with every member of the art therapy team. Every client also has an individual art therapist that they can link with. This means that there is a different level of transference to every member of the team. However, should someone in the art therapy team fall away for a period of time, it is always possible for another team member to take over and contain the work with the patient. Our function as an art therapy team therefore becomes crucially important. Together we form one structure, in order to create therapeutic containment. The client therefore has a relationship to the team structure as a whole, as well as the individual therapists. This team structure and the space where art and therapy takes place, forms a second skin, a boundary that can withstand, survive and flexibly recover from variations in the internal and external world of the client. Over time clients can learn to internalise this structure and its function. An example of internalisation of one element of this structure is when clients additionally create a space at home or finds a studio space outside the open *atelier* dedicated to developing their artwork further; thus making a safe step beyond psychiatry. We treat the participants as if they are on a sliding scale between ‘client’ and ‘artist’, we offer safety and support whilst challenging them. Working towards an exhibition is part of this broader challenge. This process gradually enables clients to securely detach themselves from *i-psy* as a mental health organisation and become more independent.

We see the open studio approach as having a two-fold function. A reliable space that can survive, is resilient and remains ongoing, this is particularly helpful to our clients with a migration or asylum background as well as those with unreliable attachments in their past. The space is welcoming, and it is possible as an artist/client to ‘be themselves’ and develop their work. One client explained that she uses the open *atelier* as a substitute family; others describe the open *atelier* as a place they feel at home in. It is an “intermediary space” (Winnicott, 1971), where play in the presence of another becomes safely possible. Contact with other clients develops naturally and when it does, a sphere that is similar to what Foulkes (1983) would describe as a ‘working group’ develops. The aim of this group is in supporting each other in developing ideas, creating artwork that is taken seriously, which can potentially be later exhibited. Sometimes clients, who have been through the experience of an exhibition, guide those who are new to this process. Clients’ artist statements and images from the annual exhibitions illustrate this process best.

J., open atelier artist

Artist statement; *Modification terrestre d'une idee en tête* (2013)

Landscapes in my dreams are immediately malleable: I can transform a landscape at will - turn it upside down, straighten it, calculate it, bounce around on it or lose myself in it. It may make my head spin, but when I dream I know where I am. The open atelier is my weekly time to relax. I do something for myself and forget about the rest. This is the first time that I have participated in an exhibition. I do so out of curiosity (i-psy, 2013, p. 57-58).

Figure 1 J. *Modification terrestre d'une idee en tête* (2013). Acrylic on canvas (40x50cm).



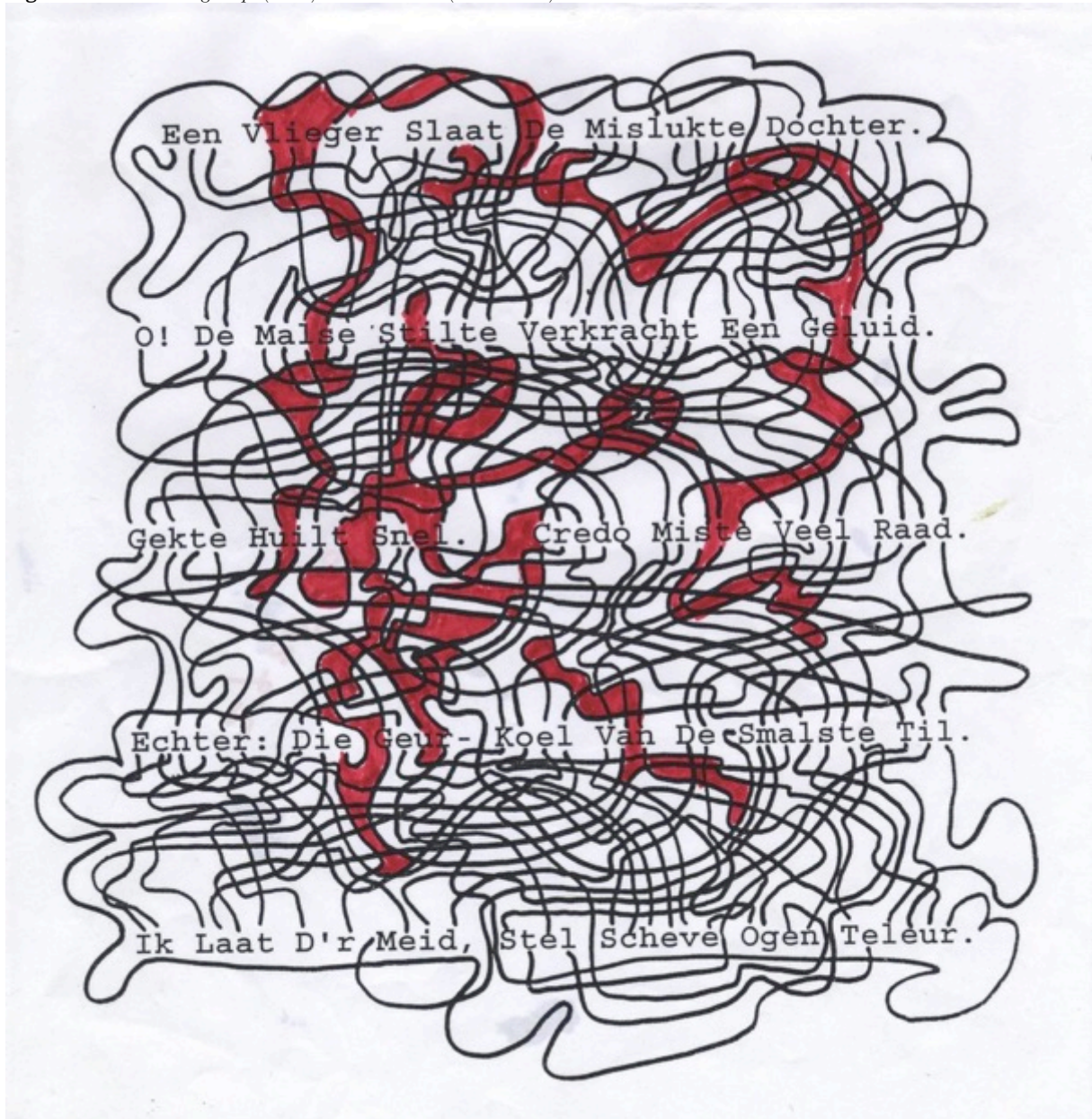
AK., open atelier artist

Artist statement; *Herhalingsrecept* [Repeat prescription] (2013)

Iconoclasm. With me, everything is in movement. Through art, I can make it motionless. Still life. I make artwork with and from paper, collage, paint, textile, anagrams, weaving.

I often arrive late or not at all, and that's possible in the open-studio. I've become less afraid of my own monsters. My work comes into existence in the open-studio; it provides a test audience. The experience of participating in an exhibition is like a 'coming out' as an artist for me (i-psy, 2013, pp. 21-22).

Figure 2 AK. *Herhalingsrecept* (2013). Mixed media (29x21.7cm).

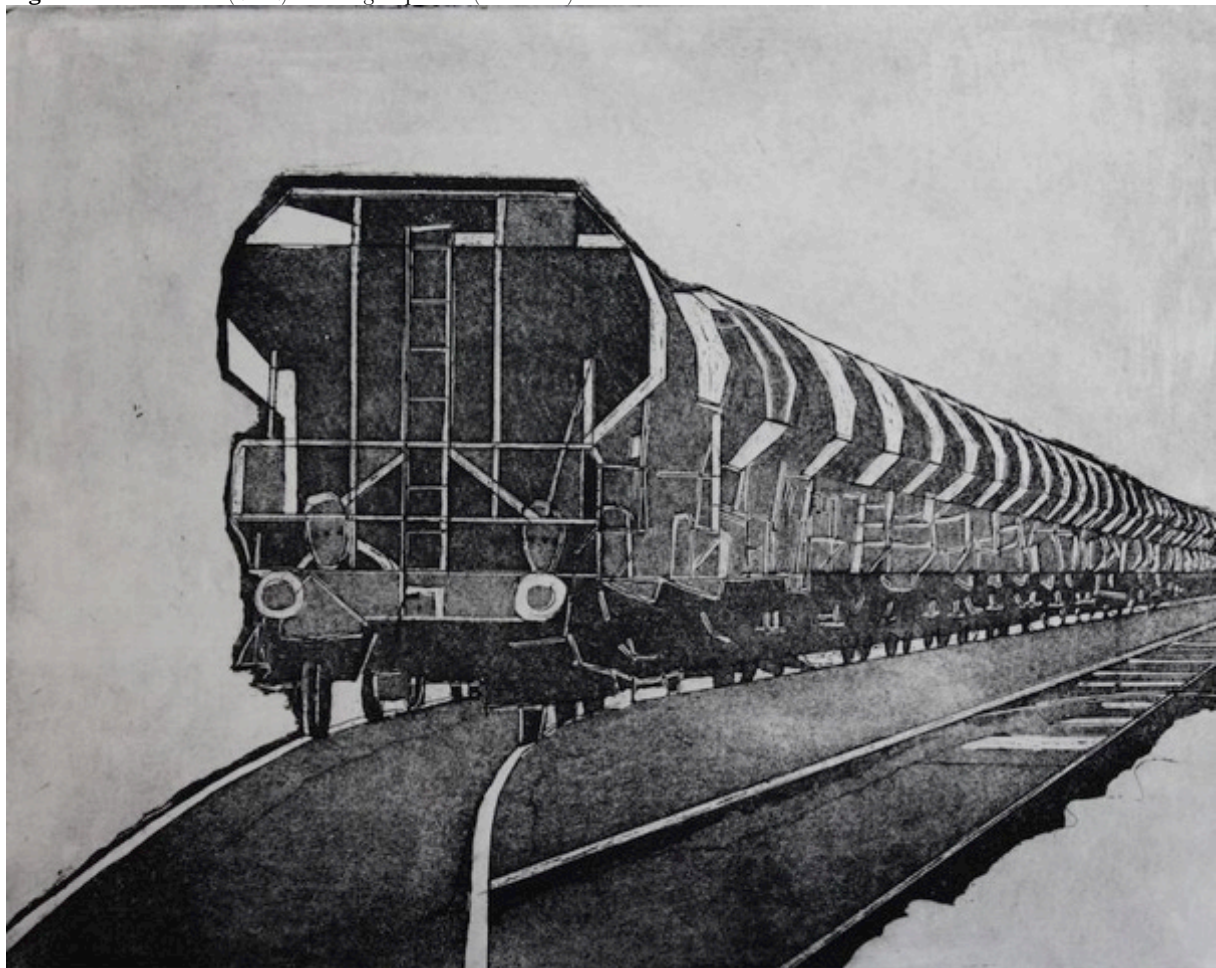


AP., open atelier artist

Artist statement; *De Trein* (2012)

This graphic work is inspired by the power the train represents. It seems that the train is moving towards you, but in fact it stands still. It is the contrast between the hidden power of the standing stillness and the rhythm of the movement that I find particularly interesting. I got the idea of exploring printmaking techniques whilst I was in the Open-Studio. Printmaking is now something I do for pleasure (i-psy, 2013, pp. 19-20).

Figure 3 AP. *De Trein* (2012). Etching/aquatint (41x51cm).



CS., open atelier artist

Artist statement; *Is it all about Tits?* (2013)

My work is frequently about the relationships between people; sometimes the result is humorous. I work on canvas, with stone, wood and other materials. The open atelier is very pleasant and inspires me. I am amongst people. Taking part in an exhibition stimulates me to keep on working. It is nice to show my work to others. Their feedback does something for my self-esteem. I am also an artist (i-psy, 2013, pp. 33-34).

Figure 4 CS. *Is it all about Tits?* (2013). Stone and wood (20cm high).



SND., open atelier artist

Artist statement; *Sahrah* (2013)

My father used to work with copper, and I used to work alongside him. I love copper. When I work with it, my father joins me in my thoughts, together with friends and family from the past. In the open atelier I sit with everyone else drawing or constructing things. It is a place where I feel good and safe. It helps me to relax. It helps to reduce my headaches. At the exhibition I show people what I do at i-psy (i-psy, 2013, pp. 75-76).

Figure 5 SND. *Sahrah* (2013). Acrylic markers and copper (21x30cm).



Many of our clients have a migration and asylum background and may have the experience of the environment, impinging on or hindering their sense of autonomy. In working with clients who have experienced trauma, where safety and playfulness disappear in the need to simply survive, we see the importance of a safe structure and acceptance as vital in creating a containing space where a healthy attachment can form. Trauma, asylum and migration are experienced on a non-verbal level and creating artwork makes it possible for these issues to be processed non-verbally in a safe setting.

In the open-studio we notice that the language that connects all the participants is art. Clients of all ages, cultures and nationalities come together for a common purpose. Having a different background therefore becomes equal to all and this environment counteracts the de-skilling and displacing effect migration can sometimes have.

O., open atelier artist

Artist statement; *Bird* (2012)

I was born in Turkey and I am Syrian Orthodox. Living in a multicultural society isn't always easy. I often look for my roots. I find my support and solace in my own culture. For me painting has been a new and personal quest. In the work I have searched for tranquillity, freedom and peace. That is why I have depicted birds and other animals. Some animals are symbolic within my culture. It reminds me of my childhood years in Turkey (i-psy, 2012, pp. 23-24).

Figure 6 O. *Bird* (2012). Acrylic on canvas.



FA., open atelier artist

Artist statement; *Untitled* (2011)

I came to the Netherlands at the age of fifty. In Morocco I had never been to school. I am sorry that I did not come here earlier on; I would have liked to achieve something. I've been painting for one year now. What I missed once, I accomplish now. My daughter lives in Morocco and I miss her very much. Painting memories of Morocco helps me to just not think of what will happen (i-psy, 2012, pp. 18).

Figure 7 FA. *Untitled* (2011). Spices, herbs, toothpaste on board.



A Moroccan woman who joined the open atelier for about a year and spoke minimal Dutch made the above artwork and artist statement. It was difficult for her to explore the possibilities of being in a new country and she therefore spent much of her time at home and in the open-studio. It had been her own idea to make a painting at home out of spices, herbs, toothpaste and all she could find. She brought it to her psychologist who then referred her to the open atelier. The materials in the open-studio encouraged her to experiment and strengthen her style. We could not have a solid conversation with her because of the unfamiliarity with each other's language; however, there was a sense of humour in her contact with other artists and staff. Her frequent presence in the open atelier made her a familiar figure and she gradually gained more and more respect for her artwork. Since we couldn't explain properly what an exhibition was and discuss her potential contribution to it, we decided to show her the way to the gallery, using public transport. When she saw her paintings on the gallery walls, she looked surprised and delighted. She attended the opening party and ensuing days with her

proud husband in tow. Having shown him her talent, she felt confident in asking for his financial support in buying her art materials, so she could continue developing her artwork at home.

The migrants we work with often deal with loneliness and struggle with building a network of support in the Netherlands. We encourage clients to build bridges beyond the limitations of their social environment and beyond the world of psychiatry, to a broader world in the arts and within the community. Our exhibitions outside of *i-psy* in a commercial gallery are a clear example of this. We stimulate and support our clients to find their own bridges in order to confidently become more self-reliant. We currently have clients working on making professional artist portfolios, blogs and individual exhibitions. One open *atelier* participant is developing her own role as a curator by organizing exhibitions.

As well as containment and safety the open-studio offers a vivid and active atmosphere. There is always something going on. An individual or group exhibition coming up, a potential buyer announces they wish to come and look at artwork, artists being asked to be interviewed at a conference, a new client being welcomed to the open-studio, artworks being photographed for a catalogue and so forth.

Figure 8 Art materials.



In part, the inspiration for this treatment program came from two organisations in the UK, *Studio Upstairs* (**Note 1**) in London and Bristol and the art therapy department set up by Kathy Killick at Hill End Hospital in St. Albans (Killick, 1997). What influenced our work was the philosophy of Studio Upstairs, managed by a committed team of practicing artists, art therapists and psychotherapists. It is not just a treatment centre but also a place where people find that through creating art, both privately and publicly, they can change and develop.

The analytic approach used in the open-studio of the art therapy department at Hill End hospital, developed by Kathy Killick, was for the treatment of clients with diagnoses of psychoses. In England during the '80s this model of art therapy was innovative and pioneering and is now an accepted,

specialist and effective treatment in working with clients with psychoses. Then the department was adjacent to a psychiatric hospital, which made it possible for patients in severe and acute states of mind to attend art therapy consistently for two hour sessions, twice daily up to five days a week. This model offers patients important levels of safety and containment. The fabric of the open-studio itself acted as an auxiliary ego in the structuring of the self, with the ultimate aim that this dynamic could eventually be internalised.

At *i-psy* we began with similar aims, such as helping clients orientate themselves in time and space, before moving on to gradually building up therapeutic relationships using art as an intermediary. The art therapy treatment helps to build the conditions wherein the client can experience a safe shift from the concrete to the symbolic. To separate fantasy from reality, to make art that can carry meaning and to move from a world in which “it is so” to a world where “it is *as if* it is so”.

CS., open atelier artist

Artist statement; *Just hold on* (2012)

I am self-taught. I mostly work in stone, but also paint on canvas. My work is influenced by my experiences, as in this sculpture. I must fight against a psychiatric illness that has placed a heavy burden on my life. The hand is holding onto the edge and is aiming upwards. The hand holds on, despite the heaviness of the load, and tries to go further and climb up (i-psy, 2012, pp- 7-8).

Figure 9 CS. *Just hold on* (2012). Stone, plaster, wood, metal.



The Catalan artist Tapies (1971) writes that art is “a way of reflecting on life – and reflection is more active than simple contemplation”. Our intention in the open-studio is to create the conditions in which the client/artist takes the capacity to play and reflect seriously. The process of art-making can open a client’s capacity to reflect, gain insight and make changes in their inner and outer world. Making art transforms clients in ways that they do not necessarily expect or plan for. In the words of the English psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, “It is play that is universal and that belongs to health:

playing facilitates growth and therefore health” (1971, p. 48). Play is the pathway to emotional and psychological wellbeing.

M., open atelier artist

Artist statement; *Untitled* (2010)

Creativity is a strong energy. To be busy in a creative way means to shape your life by giving shape to something else. You give shape to your ideas with the materials at your disposal. When the process or the product of that activity touches you, then it is important to do it. You do not have to understand the story you are telling before you've told it. Being aware of that offers a great freedom, the freedom to take care of the plans closest to your heart and to shape your own garden. Creative expression is so much about playing, and learning, and knowing and feeling, and enjoying, and excited buzzing nerves, and ideas getting a body and invisibilities getting a shape.

Figure 10 M. *Untitled* (2010). Acrylic on paper.



These are works made by an open-studio client who suffers from agoraphobia. He took more than 200 photographs of the places where he felt agoraphobic and described both visually and verbally what he experienced. Instead of rushing past the spaces, as he would normally have done, he stopped, looked, photographed and brought the photos to the open-studio to reflect on. Through the process of photographing places that trigger agoraphobia, he told us that he had become aware that the core of his fears were about isolation, insecurity and loneliness. The photographs were of places that were beyond human scale, where there was an absence of people or overwhelming crowds. The photographs were of buildings that were formidably huge or of empty cityscapes where spaces were penned in. Were he to fall ill in these desolate places, there was a danger of dying alone, without the presence of others around him. Through the process of participating in the open-studio program, exhibiting his work in a gallery and contact with the public, he came to the realisation that his

anxieties could be seen as universal. His images conveyed something powerful and meaningful to others. In relating to the public through his art, he found that these images conveyed existential concerns, felt and understood by many others. The process of making this artwork helped him to overcome his fears and reduced his symptoms.

E., open atelier artist

Artist statement; *Agoraphobia installation* (2011)

As I suffer from agoraphobia I wanted to illustrate through photography what I fear/used to fear. As a result of this “exposure” I found that my anxieties subsided.

Figure 11 E. Detail, *Agoraphobia installation* (2011)



Figure 12 Image of public looking at slides of the agoraphobia series installation.



The following artwork is made by a client who has been attending art therapy and the open *atelier* to overcome trauma and blocked creativity. Her previous artworks along with all her belongings were damaged and destroyed when her home completely burned down. She started the process of re-connecting to her past identity as an artist by reworking and repairing fire-damaged artworks and then went on prolifically to create new work towards the exhibition.

Figure 13 L. *Untitled*. Acrylic on canvas.



There are a number of inspiring organisations in the UK and the Netherlands that offer art programs aimed at supporting people with mental health issues. *Studio Upstairs* in the UK is an independently funded institution, separate from the National Health Service. It is an arts community offering an alternative to traditional arts institutions, having a therapeutic, educational and vocational function. *Stichting De Opstap* in the Netherlands (**Note 2**) is also an independently funded organisation with an emphasis on offering art education and artistic development. They hold regular art exhibitions and aim to activate people with mental health issues through art training, group support and voluntary jobs.

The *i-psy* open-studio program differs in its approach, as it is an integral part of a mainstream psychiatric institution offering therapy. The program is an important form of treatment. This treatment specifically connects psychiatry to the art world through working with external professional art curators. There is a collaboration, dialogue and partnership between the curators and art therapists, based both in a psychiatric setting and in a gallery setting. This unique partnership has not been without its challenges; the aims of therapy can at times be at odds with aesthetic aims and considerations of the art world. However, the commitment to this partnership has gradually strengthened, allowing us to learn about this unique process with every passing year the exhibitions have taken place. Our areas of difference and common goals have become more transparent. There is continual dialogue about the overlaps and differences between the ‘commercial’ world of art and the world of therapy, particularly how this links to our clients and the development of their art. This - sometimes uneasy - process has helped to create a joint vision or philosophy. Every year new participants experience a certain amount of anxiety about embarking upon the step from private to public. Showing their artwork in a professional gallery and negotiating this step with a curator can be challenging. Some can experience the journey into this ‘different world’ as an initiation. Clients who have now taken part in more than one exhibition, have become more confident about their participation, their artwork and their personal and professional development. Clients learn to internalise different aspects of the open-studio process and become more and more independent.

M., open atelier artist

Artist statement (2011)

Creativity grows in the fearless spot where ideas bubble. Every creation says: “I am not afraid! I am here!” Why would amateurs (not) be exhibited in a gallery space? Why would curators (not) be involved in a therapeutic process? What makes this combination, collaboration, clash (not) fruitful? Under what terms can there be a dialogue? What do the involved parties give and take? How (un)important is it to develop an artistic identity when being busy with creative processes? How can it (not) be of value to experience the ambiguity of therapeutic and art world processes? Why would you (not) want to call it art? How (un)important is it for the visitor to know about the roots of the products of the creative journeys?

The role of the curator has been vital to the successful functioning of the open *atelier* program. In the words of the curator duo, Sebastian Rypson and Nahuel Blaton “All in all, we believe that artworks, created in a therapeutic setting offer great opportunities for galleries. Placing artists, with or without psychiatric backgrounds, from a protected to a public environment, offers in the first place possibilities for the artist’s personal growth and career advancement. Many artists have sold work and some have gone onto build a career in art. Art therapists, also benefit from a setting where their artist/patient are exposed to the outside world by means of participating in an exhibition. For we, who are both curators and anthropologists, the experience offers us a unique insight within the art world” (Wertheim-Chaen, 2013).

In coming into contact with the exhibition curators, clients find that it is not just the artwork that is being taken seriously but more importantly themselves as artists. This shift in perspective becomes key in considering how they position themselves as individual artists. This in turn, has an affect on the public and the community. We regularly notice a positive reaction from visitors to the exhibitions and

the quality of the artworks. The function of the gallery in part becomes about changing the misplaced stigma towards psychiatry, in creating a healthy and realistic attitude. Concomitantly, this shift in perspective has a ripple effect on the networks and structures surrounding both the artist and the gallery.

We continue to explore, define and expand the space between art therapy: and embark on this journey between the world of therapy towards the world of art together with our open-studio artists. Perhaps we could describe the open *atelier* as an artwork. Rather than a still-life painting it is a dynamic, ever changing and developing sculpture. Our artist statement about the open-studio could be: A group of individuals come together and flourish. Separate figures, however, a unity. Beyond the frame everyone has his private space and goes his own way. Everyone is different, has another background, another talent, different questions and goals. Yet everyone is equal. The atmosphere is open, yet closed. Each feels free to express themselves, to be visible within the group. There is room for confusion, challenge and contact; enough calm for seclusion and being focused on oneself.

EPILOGUE A video gives an outline of how our project connects the world of therapy to the world of art (Oele, 2011).

NOTES

1. *Studio Upstairs*, UK. Website at <http://www.studioupstairs.org.uk>
2. *Stichting de opstap*, the Netherlands. Website at: <http://deopstap.nl>

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