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Thoughts about the Functionsuite project by Moira Jeffrey

In 1873 the Gloucester-born writer William Ernest Henley was admitted to Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. Henley suffered from Tubercular Arthritis and by the age of 16 his left leg had been amputated below the knee. He came to Edinburgh from England in a bid to save his right leg and was treated by the pioneering surgeon Joseph Lister whose use of antiseptics had not yet been universally accepted by the medical profession.

During 20 months of hospital treatment - and considerable pain and suffering - a number of remarkable things happened to Henley. He found his voice as a poet, he learned a number of languages and he fell in love and subsequently married.

Hospital was not a single event in his life, but a concurrence of many different events. It was not one relationship - that between surgeon and patient - but dozens of different relationships. It was not an alternative to the outside world, but a place where he viewed a particular and often hidden aspect of that world in incredibly intimate detail.

The writer Robert Louis Stevenson visited Henley in the Infirmary, and the meeting led to a collaboration on four (commercially unsuccessful) plays, including Deacon Brodie, which was in many ways a prototype for Stevenson's masterpiece Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde.

Henley's poetry may now sound old fashioned to modern ears, but the cycle of 28 poems, Hospital Verses, that he wrote in Edinburgh, are a remarkable and impressionistic document of the drama and complexity of hospital life, portraying vividly drawn characters and the diverse social classes that make up staff and patients.

It might seem a long leap from Victorian Edinburgh to the 21st century Lothian NHS, but Functionsuite - a project that brings the hospital community together with visual artists - has inherited many of Henley's concerns. When Henley subjected the intimidating and monolithic façade of the Victorian hospital to his poetic gaze he exposed the intricate structures beneath. In a similar way Functionsuite peels back the outward layers of the contemporary hospital to provide a dialogue on the needs and aspirations of its community.

In bringing artists together with patients and staff in Lothian hospitals Functionsuite reflects the complexity of circumstance, the sheer diversity of experience and the possibilities for patients, staff and artists of creative collaboration. Above all like Henley's cycle of poems the project reflects the fact that hospitals are places of both intimate and public life and that art can play a key role in the understanding and sharing of the powerful and everyday experiences of the hospital setting.

The numerous projects that Functionsuite has undertaken in the last year address the issue of artistic partnership in different ways and in different environments. Artists have worked with inpatients, outpatients and hospital staff, in a variety of settings and in an astonishing range of media and methods. Their work has resulted in temporary exhibitions, one-off performances and permanent art works.

While the outcomes are wildly different, the underlying principle is consistent. Through Functionsuite members of the hospital community have a role in transforming their own environment and creating a dialogue with those around them. Artists find themselves in new creative relationships, pushing the boundaries of their practice.

The painter Jonathan Owen, for example, worked extensively and intimately with Jocky Robertson at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital during a four month period. Jocky is an experienced and distinctive painter who found a whole new way of working with Jonathan.

The twelve new drawings shown this year in the exhibition Where do You Sleep? at the Link Gallery were developed from Jocky's own extensive repertoire of jokes, but did not shy away from controversial subjects, such as religion and war. One picture Martian Season, shows aliens from the red planet arriving in Scotland in the middle of an orange walk, having misunderstood the local term 'marching season'.

For Jocky, an artist whose earlier work had been based almost entirely on incidents from his own life story, the new work, and the collaborative experience led him to broader, shared experiences and the common currency of both humour and controversy. In his close working relationship with Jonathan - both artist's handiwork appears on the final drawings - he began a two-way conversation which developed to address a much wider hospital audience.

One of the fascinating aspects of Henley's work is that though he viewed hospital primarily through the eyes of his own experience as a patient, as a poet he became aware of the numerous individual stories including those of staff that are woven into the hospital narrative.

Jane Topping's project with the Wellcome Trust Clinical Research Facility, took the form of a three month residency in an area of hospital provision which is invisible to most visitors. The facility is a busy lab processing blood samples from around the country, in connection with research projects on a wide range of conditions from sleep apnoea to strokes.

Topping, who trained in biochemistry before becoming a painter, shadowed staff, took photographs and finally produced a watercolour that reflected both the scientific processes of the laboratory and the personal touches evident in a clinical workplace environment. Elements of the lab that staff originally considered “boring” or “worthless” including scientific equipment and handwritten post-it notes, form key aspects of Topping’s work.

The painting, which can be read from left to right reflects the process by which blood is “simplified” during the extraction of DNA, the four colours on the painting’s right representing DNA’s building blocks: guanine, cytosine, adenine and thymine.

At the beginning of her project, staff had considered that involvement with Functionsuite might simply be a means of purchasing some art works for their walls. A lengthy involvement with the artist, enabled them to reflect on their own training and routines whilst learning about the processes involved in Topping’s creative skills. The resultant painting, which reflects that sharing and exchange of information, was first put on temporary exhibition in a public space in the hospital and now hangs in the Wellcome Facility. Its popularity has been such that one staff member reported taking a new route to her workplace, so she could pass the exhibition each day.

Often, as in Henley’s work with Stevenson, collaboration can transform an artist’s work by allying new stimuli and experiences with existing skills. Paul Rooney, an artist who has often worked with pop music and choral song, collaborated with Louise Holden a professional singer and a patient at the Speech and Language Therapy Department at St. John’s Hospital, Livingston and her therapist Gary Withnell.

Where Rooney’s previous work has often rested on incongruity or humour, by transcribing everyday language, for example call centre conversations, into song, his project for Functionsuite provided an unusual unity between form and content.

Arriving with a set project in mind, the act of collaboration turned Rooney’s plans around completely and the end result was Psalm a performance that fused Holden’s own description of voice problems with the sacred music of Psalm 77. During a performance by the St. Andrew Camerata at the hospital, Holden, a support worker for deaf students, signed along.

The project which narrated Holden’s experience of losing and recovering her speaking voice became a rich and moving image for broader experiences of voiceless, a key issue for many including hospital patients. “Because of the process,” says Rooney, “this work went beyond what I had done before. There was something transcendent about it. It was metaphorically much more powerful, the ideas of voice and silence acting as a metaphor for people’s visibility or invisibility. “

Psalm grew from Holden’s story, but as an artwork it now exists in a broader context. There was a recent performance of the work at Tate Liverpool and it will be sung again at Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh this September. The importance of collaborative work exists not just between the participants, who gain voices and new perspectives, but also in the journey the work makes in the minds of its audience.

The art that is created by Functionsuite will have a life of its own; the relationships set in train by the collaborations have their own momentum. The experiences of participants can take them to quite unexpected new places.

With Henley’s hospital stay it was the same. As a poet, his Hospital Verses made his name in the Victorian era, but after meeting with Stevenson he was transformed into a lasting legend. For Henley- boisterous, outspoken and one-legged-became the model for one of literature’s best-known figures: Long John Silver.