

# **THE 420 PROJECT: LIFE, THE UNIVERSE AND 26 STAFFORD STREET**

**Adam Douglass**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The 420 Centre is an activities-based centre/service for people recovering from mental illness. The Centre is a safe environment for people to come for support, art sessions, work groups, cheap lunches, outings, meetings with friends, a coffee, a tea, a smoke and the odd game of pool - and it is the namesake for a community arts project called *The 420 Project*.

The final incarnation of the finished art project was installed at the Blue Oyster Art Project Space in Dunedin from July 10 through to July 28, 2007. Participants in the process are as diverse as they are many. They are artists/patrons of the 420 Centre, artists from the wider Dunedin community that include established, emerging and decorative artists, art educators, students and individuals involved with the Blue Oyster Art Project Space. In the eight months that the project has been running, two hundred and fifteen people have been involved.

### **PHYSICAL PROJECT**

Two x 360-degree drawing installations consumed the two upper spaces of the Blue Oyster Art Project Space and the lower space was used for Tuesday art sessions involving 420 patrons and the wider community. Exhibition-goers could paint a panel there throughout the duration of the exhibition, until there were no panels left. The mural/installation was made up of around 1300 35cm<sup>2</sup> recycled plywood panels. Artists were encouraged to take a panel from the work in progress to an area allocated for art sessions and create it with the group. Some people have felt uncomfortable, or have been unable to attend and have worked on a section in their own space. The project became an evolving drawing and documented collective meditation.

### **Objectives of *The 420 Project*:**

- o to make the creative process accessible to everyone who uses the service
- o to create a new and powerful aesthetic experience
- o to empower people through creating the opportunity for them to have a voice and to develop their own artistic language
- o to explore artistic possibilities in a supportive environment with therapeutic benefits
- o to develop a dialogue with the wider community
- o to attempt to further eliminate the stigma attached to mental illness
- o to have fun together
- o to develop an appreciation for the arts
- o to create an artwork which reflects an aspect of social consciousness in Dunedin
- o to document a culture and subculture
- o to integrate participants into a wider artistic community, and thus
- o to further develop dialogue amongst artists and
- o to reinforce the idea of art not just being for the élite, but having community roles also



Top: *The 420 Project*, work in progress at the 420 Centre, December 2006.  
Below: *The 420 Project*, painting individual pieces, work in progress at the 420 Centre, Dunedin, February 2007.

In my project proposal to the Blue Oyster Art Project Space, I outlined the objectives:

I'm interested in the artist's role in society, status, art as a therapeutic activity, art as a language and a vehicle to develop dialogue, art as an aesthetic experience, perception, and the creative process...Within this project I hope to bring a range of artists together from different disciplines, who have different objectives, different status, different mental states, gender, sexualities, a range of people basically.<sup>4</sup> I want to document a social consciousness, and in the process eliminate some stigma, develop a dialogue in the community and create a platform for recovery.

Grant Kester has written on this issue, taking snippets of text from Jürgen Habermas in order to discuss some of Habermas' concepts related to dialogical aesthetics:

Every subject with the competence to speak 'or express their voice is allowed to take part in discourse', and 'everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatsoever', as 'everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatsoever', and 'everyone is allowed to express his or her attitudes, desires or needs'.<sup>1</sup> This egalitarian interaction cultivates a sense of 'solidarity' among discursive participants who are as a result,<sup>2</sup> intimately linked in an intersubjectively shared form of life'.<sup>3</sup>

I can identify with these ideas in relation to *The 420 Project*.

### **EVOLUTION OF THE 420 PROJECT**

For the past two and a half years I've been employed as an art coordinator at the 420 Centre. Basically, I'm employed to facilitate an atmosphere where patrons can create. I've found collective/collaborative projects to be really positive socially, creatively and in terms of recovery. *The 420 Project* is the third collective/collaborative project, and the first to actively involve the wider arts community, and to be viewed in an art space context. The inspiration for the project was drawn from a collaborative drawing made in 1999

and involving Bryn Corkery, Lara Cook, Jane La hood, and myself (then flatmates, and still good friends). At that time, we would tape a piece of card above the fireplace; one person would draw for five minutes, and would then make way for the next person. We predominantly used oil pastels. It was a fun way to draw with great potential and a considerable chance element. This way of drawing was also a really productive way to meditate on attachment, impermanence and to focus the mind. One would also experientially develop an appreciation for different perspectives.

Fast forward six years, and I'm working at the 420 Centre (the then 420 Drop-in Centre) in Dunedin. After a few experiments with arts and crafts, I decided to try an evolving drawing. Because of the nature of the 420 Centre as a place where people drop by when they choose, one can never predict who and how many people will be there at a certain time, and what sort of mental space an individual would be in. One had to be open to anything. People there didn't necessarily want to learn anything specific but liked having the option to create. Therefore, there was a lot of potential in the evolving drawing idea; as with an evolving drawing, there is always a source of inspiration (previous drawings) and thus one doesn't require subject matter to draw, it is already there. Some people choose to be connectors and bring in shapes, colour, subject-matter or form from the surrounding panels. Some people tend to create explosions of their own with no connections to adjacent panels. It is inclusive to have the balance of both in the creation of an object: there is room for everyone. I draw with everybody else, sometimes by myself, mainly connecting... I try to make myself accessible to people who would like to learn a certain technique, or who need a hand to work out what they want to do. Discussion is encouraged, but not necessary. I like the idea of people developing their own language, sometimes through trial and error. Experimentation is encouraged, and over time an individual could become aware of a common thread and discover themselves and their own interests in their artwork.

## PROCESS OF THE 420 PROJECT

*The 420 Project* was accessible to everyone and there were no boundaries with regard to subject matter or medium, although we had limited resources and if an individual wanted to use a medium that we could not supply they had to bring their own. People were expected to respect other people's art work and each individual involved in the centre. There was a certain degree of structure in the project, which ensured the physical balance of the big composition, but there was also a large enough chance element to create a really exciting object. As Herbert Read wrote:

Any considerable work of art has two distinct elements: a formal element appealing to our sensibility for reasons which cannot be stated with any clarity, but which are certainly psychological in origin; and an arbitrary element of more complex appeal, which is the outer clothing given to these underlying forms.<sup>5</sup>

The painted silhouettes (taken from photographs of patrons, staff and artists projected onto the square panels) act as a link between panels, which helps to hold the piece together, and they create an interesting dynamic juxtaposed against the psychedelic, psychological landscape of the whole composition. Perception, the artist, the mind, the viewer; the artworks and the community interacted.

Time and time again, people expressed their reservations when painting a panel, but after a little coaxing (sometimes) people got involved. For me, it is rewarding to see people focused, enjoying themselves exploring possibilities. More often than not people are surprised at what they have achieved, which sometimes acts as a catalyst for more creative pursuits. I have been constantly surprised by the standard of work completed for the project by everyone involved. Some people who don't see themselves as artists showed natural flair and intuitive understanding and many artists contributed a lot of love, time, intelligence and energy to works without any financial return or obvious recognition. I have been continuously inspired by this sharing, generosity and creative activity. All completed works were viewed in the same light, and the interaction between these works is what takes

the viewer's experience to another level. Seeing one's artwork becoming an integral part of something bigger can fuel a sense of self belief, and when someone sees a friend or acquaintance contributing their voice they are potentially inspired to do the same. Knowing that the work is going to be exhibited and donated to the community further reinforced the importance of the artwork and the individual's involvement.

When an individual's mind is focused, an exchange of ideas can happen with less effort than expected, and exploring visual potential can also free up the mind, creating a spontaneous, easy, natural dialogue. People became involved in dialogue without even opening their mouths!

With the participation of a variety of artists other than myself, people also had access to a range of approaches and could choose how they wanted to communicate.

Different philosophies, objectives, aesthetics and ideas were represented. People could meet other people and experience the personalities behind the artwork. I appreciate a range of creative endeavours and have a knowledge of a variety of art options, but I also have my own beliefs and artistic pursuits. Some people identified with certain individuals and their mode of communication. This was very positive as I can only offer so much and different people may require different options. *The 420 Project*, I believe, was beneficial for the patrons in terms of integrating them with a wider community outside of mental health services. Artists, on the other hand, were introduced to an important sector of society, a sector which is often overlooked, even though they can offer so much.

"It's great to get down from my ivory tower; I enjoyed being part of a community", said Greg Lewis (participating artist/painter) when referring to time spent at the 420 Centre.

This dialogue in the community will develop further. Awareness of the centre and its role has grown. Everyone is in the position to develop an appreciation for other perspectives. This project was a productive opportunity for the individuals involved to exhibit together in a well established and respected art space, and to experiment and develop new ideas. The project



also challenged the perception of some members of our society with regard to mental illness.

Rather than requiring a finished object as a catalyst for dialogue, the project has been a continual dialogical work, which may further stimulate discussion on completion and installation in the Blue Oyster Art Project Space. Site-specific work is going to be installed and loaned around the community, communicating ideas through aesthetic experience, and hopefully further stimulating discourse in the public sphere. Possible installations (permanent and temporary) include projects at the Dunedin Public Hospital, Wakari Psychiatric Hospital, Otago Polytechnic School of Art, Dunedin Public Library, the 420 Centre, the Pact Group head office and others. Any potential profits from the sale of the art work will be divided between the 420 Centre and Blue Oyster Art Project Space. As Grant Kester wrote:

We typically view the artist as a kind of exemplary bourgeois subject, actualising his or her will through the heroic transformation of nature or the assimilation of cultural difference – alchemically elevating the primitive, the degraded, and the vernacular into great art. Throughout, the locus of expressive meaning remains the radically autonomous figure of the individual artist. A dialogical aesthetic suggests a very different image of the artist; one defined in terms of openness, of listening and a willingness to accept intersubjective vulnerability.<sup>6</sup>

The process is as important as the finished object. A step inside the creative process – walking, talking and interacting in an artwork, and turning the everyday world into art – can potentially heighten an experience; can create the sensation of being more fully present in a particular moment in time; and can potentially extinguish some feelings of anxiety. The idea of ‘living an artwork’ can be a positive experience and may create a positive subjective truth.

I have learnt so much from the patrons of the centre: so much wisdom. Many of the people who use the centre have experienced a lot of suffering and have thus developed non-judgemental, accepting attitudes, compassion, openness, honesty, spontaneity and some pretty wicked humour too! The project has been positive because a section of the community has experienced and expressed some of these qualities together:

#### Acknowledgements:

Many thanks must go to the Pact Group for funding *The 420 Project*; to all the artists who have donated their time and expertise; and to JB Reilly, Fiona Panarau and all the staff at the 420 Centre; to the Blue Oyster Art Project Space and Katrina Jones and Sally Williams; to Bridie Lonie and Leoni Schmidt from the Otago Polytechnic School of Art; to family and friends; to Annette Seifert, Cargils Enterprises and Southern Film. Also: in loving memory of Christine Kendal and Brendan Alexander.



The project has been supported by the Pact Group who provides community and residential support for more than eight hundred people with intellectual and/or psychiatric disabilities (mental illness).

A documentary film is being made about the project by filmmakers Katrina Jones and Sally Williams and this has received support from Dunedin's NHNZ and the Dunedin City Council's Creative Communities.

- 1 Jürgen Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification," in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Webber Nicholson (Cambridge: Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 89. In his essay "The Gift in Littoral Art Practice," Bruce Barber uses Habermas' concept of "communicative action" to elucidate recent projects by Wochenklauser (an Austrian arts group), REPO History, Istvan Kantor, and others. Versions of this essay have been published in *Fuse*, 19, 2 (Winter 1996) and in *Intervention: Post Object and Performance Art in New Zealand in 1970 and Beyond*, ed. Jennifer Hay (Christchurch: Robert MacDougall Art Gallery and ANNEX Press, 2000), 49-58.
- 2 Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art*, from the section "Dialogical Aesthetics". Kester elaborates on a Jürgen Habermas quote, referenced in endnote 1, pp. 80-81.
- 3 Jürgen Habermas, "Justice and Solidarity," *Philosophical Forum*, 21 (1989-90), 47.
- 4 Text taken from Douglass' proposal to the Blue Oyster Art Project Space, proposing *The 420 Project*, June 2006.
- 5 Herbert Read (1893-1968) "What is Revolutionary Art?" in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds), *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (London: Routledge, 1994), 512.
- 6 Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art*, from the section "Dialogical Aesthetics". See endnote 2. Kester discusses the role of the artist in a dialogical aesthetic in relation to Jürgen Habermas' concept of an "identity forged through social and discursive interaction."

\* All photographs courtesy of Adam Douglass.

The subtitle of this report, "Life, the Universe and 26 Stafford St", was inspired by the title of Douglass Adams' fictional novel, *Life the Universe and Everything*.

**Adam Douglass** is an artist working with drawing, painting, and the community. He is currently engaged in a process-based dialogical drawing within the community. Adam exhibits nationally, and has been working alongside the patrons of the 420 Centre as an art coordinator for the past 3 years. (The 420 Centre is a service for people recovering from mental illness.) To view the finished assembled project, related works and text, visit [www.adamdouglass.co.nz](http://www.adamdouglass.co.nz)

Images opposite page, above and below: *The 420 Project*, work in progress at the 420 Centre, Dunedin, March - May 2007.\*