

# ART WORK IN PRISONS

Francois Matarasso

Talk given on 10 March 2016 at the Faculdade de Psicologia e Ciências da Educação da Universidade do Porto, Portugal

---

## INTRODUCTION

Let me start by thanking [Pele](#) for inviting me to come to the conference and offer these final reflections. Learning about the rationale, development and evaluation of [ECOAR](#), have been fascinating. The work's importance has been evident in each presentation, but never more so than in the contributions from the present and former inmates of the prison service who have experienced Pele's work, and, in some cases, are now involved in its delivery.

My comments come from two perspectives, framed by my own experience as a practitioner and a researcher. For 15 years I was involved in community art programmes of a similar kind (including some work in prisons) and I still work with organisations in the field. But I have also spent 20 years as an independent researcher, trying to understand the processes and outcomes of this kind of work. I have heard much today that is consistent both with my personal experience as [a community artist](#) and [a researcher](#) and with [the evidence](#) that has gradually been accumulating over the past decades.

But before I talk about this, let me share with you an old joke that I've been thinking about as I've listened to the accounts of behavioural change that have been presented today. It goes like this: 'How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one but the light bulb really has to want to change'. I hope you'll see why this came to mind by the time I conclude these brief remarks.

## A THEORETICAL INSIGHT FROM A CRIMINOLOGIST

The [Scottish Prisons Arts Network](#) recently published a booklet for artists working in prisons, written by Jess Thorpe, which you can find online.<sup>1</sup> In it there's a short essay by Professor Fergus McNeill from the University of Glasgow in which he identifies three stages of desistance (the term criminologists use to describe the process by which people move away from offending behaviour). He writes that:

Matarasso, F., 2016, Art Work in Prisons v.1 (03/16). This talk was given on 10 March 2016 at the conference 'Arte e Cidadania - Diálogos em Contexto Prisional' University of Porto, Portugal. © 2016 François Matarasso: this work is distributed under the [Creative Commons](#) Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International licence. You are free to copy, distribute, or display the digital version on condition that: you attribute the work to the author; the work is not used for commercial purposes; and you do not alter, transform, or add to it. <http://arestlessart.com>

Shadd Maruna and Stephen Farrall (two leading researchers) draw an important distinction between primary and secondary desistance; the former relates merely to behaviour, the latter implies a related shift in identity. They suggest that shifts in identity and self-concept matter in securing longer-term, sustained changes in behaviour as opposed to mere lulls in offending. [...] Recently, I have begun to develop the concept of tertiary desistance; referring not just to shifts in behaviour or identity but to shifts in one's sense of belonging to a (moral) community.<sup>2</sup>

McNeill goes on to identify a number of ways in which the arts can support this process, based on a review of the relevant research literature. He says that the arts

can help to build better relationships between prisoners and between prisoners and staff, they can engage prisoners in educational and personal development processes, they can help prisoners to recognise and develop their existing strengths and their positive potential, they can build self-esteem and self-confidence, they can both use and encourage peer support and team or group work, and they can encourage participation in other forms of learning.<sup>3</sup>

This theory of why people move away from offending behaviour and the contribution that the arts can make to that process, is very clear, but I want to take the discussion forward in three ways, taking account both of Fergus McNeill's ideas and what the various presenters have shared during the course of the day.

First, while there is nothing in McNeill's account of how participation in the arts can support change, it seems to me partial understanding that leaves out some of the most interesting aspects of artist experience. It also mainly describes the benefits of participation, not participation in art, something that is often overlooked.

Secondly, when we consider the impact of arts programmes, we think more about if than why and how: that has been the case today, with a few exceptions. And yet why and how are vital to improving practice, as I shall explain in a moment.

Finally, there is nothing inevitable about the effects that the arts have on people – and yet, paradoxically, those effects tend to be most profound if we accept that reality and do not try to engineer a supposedly desirable change in others.

### **OTHER BENEFITS OF THE ARTS**

First, let's look at some other benefits of participating in art – especially some things that are specific to the process of artistic creation. The arts can surprise us – about our capacities, skills and interests, what we and others can achieve, how we feel about things and much more. And then we can be surprised by the new ways in which we see ourselves and others see us, when we have suddenly found a previously unsuspected talent for rap or dance or mimicry, when we can make people laugh or can create a striking image.

The arts surprise us also because they allow us to speak in different ways. Not just the formal language of everyday life but through the body or the voice, in colours, and touch, by instinct, feeling and supra-rational thinking.

The arts are about human experience, so they encourage personal reflection and insight, especially about human behaviour, relationships and how we make sense of the world. They allow us to try speaking truthfully about ourselves and our feelings because artistic expression allows for ambiguity and deniability. And so they allow us to be brave, experiment and to be different: as one person said earlier '*I left my comfort zone*'.

And in doing all those things, the arts enable us to be heard, recognized, and accepted, to become part of a community in the way that Fergus McNeill describes. All of that takes us far beyond changing *behaviour* into the more profound and life-altering dimensions of changing identity (a personal sense of self) and belonging – being a responsible member of a community defined by moral values and meanings in the world.

That is some of what participation in art can bring that participation in other activities does not.

### **A THEORY OF CHANGE**

We've heard a lot today about the ways in which people have benefited or been changed by their experience and, as I've said, that fits both with the British evidence and my own experience. But there's been less discussion about *why this happens* – what you might call the theory of change. So, for example, why does taking part in a dance project lead one person to say that they now have better relationships with prison officers? It's not obvious that this should be an outcome. There is a danger in thinking backwards from results to activities and assume that there is an obvious connection.

This matters partly because it is a theory of change that helps connect inputs with outcomes but more, from my point of view because it helps the artists – and those who commission them – understand why the work is important and how different approaches can produce different outcomes. It's not doing theatre in prison that produces good results. It's a particular group of artists, with specific values, knowledge, skills and experience, working in particular ways and conditions that produces good results.

Unless we think about why, we can't improve practice and achieve better results.

### **SUCCESS CANNOT BE GUARANTEED**

It is dangerous to believe that art projects will produce specific change in individuals. We are autonomous subjects. We bring ourselves, our pasts, our learned behaviours, our beliefs, our capacities and everything else to every art experience we have.

Art is not a declaration: it is an invitation. Unless we respond to it, it is dead. And we all respond to it differently because we are each different. This doesn't mean that there will be no change: it means that change is co-created by all those in the room. So it can't be controlled or determined in advance.

What artists need from institutions is trust – trust to work in the ways that only they can work, to produce the results that only they can produce. Exactly what those results will be for each participant cannot be predetermined or guaranteed. We can guarantee standards of performance – inputs – but not outcomes. However, understanding and securing standards of performance are a foundation of enabling trust.

We need the arts to create a safe space which people can choose to enter, to explore, to discover. In prison, with all its pressures, that space can be especially hard to find, but also especially important. If that space is available inmates – and guards too – might be willing to enter it, they might begin, like the light bulb, to want to change. And, with time and trust and the positive experiences that art brings them, they might even start to feel able to change as well.

Artists are very good at creating space, but they need to be trusted and supported to do that, not just today, not just here, but within a coherent system that can support change in people's lives inside and outside prison.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a profound shift in European culture. We started to believe that all children should be educated – that education was a right. I hope and believe that during the 21<sup>st</sup> century there will be a similar change in our attitudes to the arts and that we understand that being able to take part in the arts is not just a paper commitment but a precondition of all human development – in prison and out.

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.creativescotland.com/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/33836/Artists-Guide-Working-in-Scottish-Prisons.pdf](http://www.creativescotland.com/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/33836/Artists-Guide-Working-in-Scottish-Prisons.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Fergus McNeill 'Creativity in Context' in *Working in Scottish Prisons: An Artist's Guide*, by Jess Thorpe, published by Scottish Prisons Arts Network & Creative Scotland, 2015, p.11

<sup>3</sup> Fergus McNeill 'Creativity in Context' in *Working in Scottish Prisons: An Artist's Guide*, by Jess Thorpe, published by Scottish Prisons Arts Network & Creative Scotland, 2015, p.13