

Art Therapy Online: ATOL

OBITUARY: Michael Edwards (1930-2010)

John Henzell

I first met Michael about forty years ago. At the time those of us involved in art therapy were forming a professional body which became the British Association of Art Therapists, activities like this bring people with common interests together who otherwise might never have met and this happened with Michael and I. Another related connection with Michael was the 'Education through Art' movement which held great sway in the 1960s and 70s. The central idea in the movement was that art and aesthetic experience were pivotal in all learning and teaching, not a holiday away from 'real' experience, but at the heart of living itself. In 1970 the International Society for Education Through Art held its Congress at Coventry in the UK, I ran a workshop at this gathering and Michael joined it. I enjoyed working with him, I thought he was modest about himself and I later came to see that one of his gifts was not to 'blow his own trumpet' so to speak, an image I will return to, but to help people he was involved with to find out how they really wanted to be.

In following years I was with him at BAAT meetings where he often sought to replace fruitless difference with useful compromise. At the time he was a Senior Lecturer at the School of Art Education at Priory Road in Edgbaston, Birmingham. The School was jointly run by the University of Birmingham and

the City of Birmingham Polytechnic. The philosophy of the school was much informed by child centred education, arts based education and the philosophy of art education. The Head of School was Lucy Burroughs and its staff included philosophers, sociologists, artists, photographers and musicians. Michael's own position within the school was to run a qualifying art therapy course within the School's postgraduate degrees. Priory Road was the first in the UK to offer a postgraduate qualification in this field. In 1974 I became a student and supervisee of his, on the Postgraduate Diploma in Art Education. Following the degree I became a Research Fellow at the School and was involved there until 1980. This experience of working and thinking in an institution of considerable sophistication was seminal for me and indissolubly linked with Michael's support and patronage. Others students at this time were Peter Byrne, Andrea Gilroy and a little later Joy Schaverien.

Vivid in my memory are recollections of end of academic year celebrations, July in Britain. The School of Art Education was in former times a large suburban house with an extensive back garden. In the balmy late summer weather on the occasion of my memory a marquee was erected under whose shade were benches laden with food and drinks – some of the latter brewed on the premises, and wrapped in damp hessian, a whole lamb cooked buried underneath a bonfire behind the marquee, and all the while a jazz band played and Mike – as I called him, with his approval, cheeks ballooning out as buglers' do, blowing his heart into the trumpet as warm night fell.

Years later, after a period of relative musical abstinence during his training as a Jungian analyst in Zurich, where, incidentally, he archived, or valiantly attempted to, the thousands of images made by Jung's and his associates' patients, he told me that he was walking home in Zurich and passed a musical instrument shop. There in the window was a cornet beckoning him, he bought it and resumed playing. Being a Jungian he, as I remember, dubbed this event a synchronicity, I might have preferred serendipity, but both may amount to the same thing. In visits to Bideford and Falmouth in the South West, days of

discussion about art, psychotherapy and philosophy were sometimes followed by Michael's trumpet playing in a band. As was also the case at Cumberland Lodge in Windsor Great Park, the legendary annual residential summer schools organised by the Champernowne Trust in which Michael was a prominent figure.

The trumpet and music are reminders of America as an important key to Michael's imagining of things. The music he played was an American idiom, in particular of the United States. Whether we like it or not the USA has powerfully influenced the world we live in at almost every level, maybe nowhere more richly than in popular music, it seems quite impossible to imagine our life without it. Mike's version of this was traditional jazz where there is an emphasis on ensemble playing, a rich interweaving of instrumental voices ranging from the boisterously joyous to the soulful and sad. It is a far cry from stuffed shirts in concert halls. With Michael though it wasn't just the music, he knew more about, and really understood, what was happening in North American psychotherapy and art therapy. His was a transatlantic influence on us in Britain.

From the late 1970s and into the 80s Michael helped Concordia University in Montreal create the first Art Therapy Masters course in Canada. His transatlantic influence was as important to the Canadians as it was to us in Britain. It provided an alternative model in North America, one might even say an antidote, to a dominant clinical model in which art therapists were thought of as 'adjunct' therapists whose function was to present psychiatrists and psychologists with the images (symptoms) on which they would then apply their 'expert' diagnostic and prognostic assessments, as if the art works concerned were something like psychological X-ray plates. This was especially true of the Toronto model in Canada.

We are all unlikely hands dealt by genetics, language and personal experience, always unique and therefore irreplaceable. In Michael's case, he seemed to me

in search of a meaning which he found more than anywhere else in Jung's legacy. But in another perhaps more important sense he discovered something more androgynous than a Jungian patriarchy; he fully combined bold proclamations, the trumpet, with the sympathetic receptivity of a listener, the vigorous laying down of shapes, patterns and resemblances with the careful vision of a watcher. It is in the vivid contrast of these two sides of him, of which his friends, patients and family must be very aware at present, that his great value to all of these factions, private and public, must lie.

One further observation seems to me to the point in summing up what Michael's importance was and still is. His friends, myself among them, often said to him that he should write more and he would somewhat apologetically agree, saying he was planning to write something about this or that issue, problem or question, and it does seem his contributions to the literature seem less than the generous wideness of his culture, erudition and interests. But one only has time in a lifetime to explore a certain number of things in depth. I think Michael's gifts were performative rather than written. They are impressed in relationships, conversations and improvisations with many people over a long time, in memory rather than preserved in scripts or scores. This is in part why we shall miss him.

Biography

John Henzell was born in Manchester in 1938. His family moved to Australia in 1940 where he grew up and was educated. After studying art he returned to Britain in 1959 and worked in psychiatric hospitals as an art therapist. He helped to form the British Association of Art Therapists during the early 1960s and worked at Napsbury Hospital where he met a number of seminal figures in psychiatry, including Ronnie Laing, Aron Esterson and Tom Farewell.

During the 1970s he was a post-graduate student then research fellow at the School of Art Education in Birmingham and then held academic positions in British and Australian universities until he retired in 2008. He has lectured and written widely on the overlaps between the fields of art and of psychotherapy and continues his interests in that area.

He now lives in Fremantle, near Perth, in Western Australia.