

# PLANETS AND MARZIPAN

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Image 1. Planets and marzipan, Project school, Oslo. H.Sundby, 2015

**Abstract.** In the project *Planets and Marzipan* I want to questioning how, and wheter, the visual artist , without other training, can plan and teach students with severe autismdiagnoses and difficulties with language and learning. I studied the role of the visual artist as a teacher for students with special needs, at the Høgskolen i Volda, on the westcoast of Norway, 2015. Taking use of big, well equiped room is an important part of the project. Four students from an autistic special class in Oslo, normally using classroom quite isolated, small and clean, shall travell throug the city, visiting a professional art school three times, being taught painting from artists that they dont know yet. I will meet them att the school. I feel I could not have done this exercize if it was not for my experience through drawing and painting with my own autistic daughter at home for many years. My daughter Agnes received a relaxed and involved attitude through the activity. Both parens were involved, both as visual professional artists. Drawing and painting as a tool for sharing and proudness. Agnes and I took part in the Atuism=Human project that took place in Oslo Okt 1917, initiated by prof. Meltem Yilmaz.

## Introduction

I only know one variant of autism really well. My daughter (14yr) has children's autism. Apparently you can have children's autism your whole life. The categories and labels describing where someone is, in the autistic spectrum, can be misleading.

I write this text, as a visual artist and a mother. I believe art can make a difference. The reason I believe that is because whilst practicing art in our home, our daughter became calm for long periods of time.

Agnes could self harm or bite when not calm, and this made finding activities difficult. As both her parents were practicing artists, we made art a focus in our home. When Agnes was twelve she stopped drawing. This is a known phenomenon, which I have read about and find fascinating. Coincidentally, at about the same time, she began to master sign language to a certain degree.

I had known fantastic times, drawing and painting with our daughter. Experienced pride, laughter and happiness, instead of frustrations.

But Agnes was not an artist. She was not interested in the end result. The results she attained were completely dependant on our intervening at a 'good moment', and taking the 'finished' picture away from her. Without this intervention, she would continue drawing on the paper until she literally worked a hole in it.

A significant development came when Agnes began wanting to hear music whilst she drew. She began to stand up and dance with her hands like a conductor. I felt she experienced a bodily sense of time and space during these activities, which was absent at other times in her life.

I became intrigued: how would it be for other autistic children to work together with other artists? How would they cope, with the significant challenge of being in new, unknown spaces, and with meeting new artists. An artist is not a trained teacher or pedagogue. What could they teach the children, and what would the children be able to take away from such an experience.

The course I describe in this article, is the result of that initial question, and an attempt to answer to some degree, the questions I had surrounding this subject.

Below I will describe in some detail, how we proceeded, and how we coped, when I took the chance of inviting four students from a special needs school, into a large popular art college in central Oslo. Here, over a period of weeks, they were given classes by an artist. Both artist and children were challenged by the process, in a most positive way.



Image 2. Planets and marzipan, Project school, Oslo. H.Sundby, 2015

### **Aim for students**

1. Involve the students so that they feel safe and experience an ownership of the working environment.
2. To give the students a physical experience; both of themselves and also the physical space they find themselves in.
3. Increase their knowledge of art as an independent arena for self expression and activity.
4. The children will refer to their own experience within future learning.
5. I will take inspiration from this meeting with autistic children, and possibly use it within my own work at a suitable later date.

### **Aim for myself**

1. To get to know better, children with within the Autistic spectrum Diagnosis (ASD).
2. To create a suitable courseware for this bracket of children. To gain experience and visual material which can be used in linked projects. For the headmaster: Ensure that her school keeps an open and inclusive attitude to as broad a spectrum of participants as is practically possible.

The participants in this project consists of four students with a relatively high level of autism. The students are between 10-12 yrs and are accompanied by their individual teachers. The teaching takes into account that communication and feelings arise spontaneously and things must be flexible. The students will be visiting an art school (previously a marzipan factory, now an art college) three times. There they will carry out a collaborative fresco on the theme of the planets. They are familiar with the theme from their recent school work. The headmaster at the art college will participate in the teaching together with myself. There will be ten participants: six adults and four children. In the last session there will also be two artists who will document the workshop (with photo and video). The students names are: Donna (12), Stian (10), Elling (10) and Knut (12). (These are not their real names).



Image 3. Planets and marzipan, Project school, Oslo. H.Sundby, 2015

### **Content and process**

Before the project starts, I observe the class at their own school. They are making easter eggs. I don't get an impression of their skill sets or language, and the class disintegrates before the lesson is up. I am asked a question from Donna: Did you give birth to Agnes? (My daughter who is in the class) – Have you gene tested Agnes? - What doesn't Agnes like? And she continues: I am pretty, not cute! (I feel the breath of a summerfly, a windfall of deep meaningfulness, thrown into the air, like gold dust). The teachers say I mustn't have too high expectations, it only takes a tiny thing for a class to be distracted, even if the activity is excellent. I send a picture of the art college (Prosjektskolen) to the students beforehand, so they know what to expect.

### **First session: warm up - What can we talk about, and how?**

We meet the children in the backyard, by the entrance to the Projectschool. Donna: «it's really messy here, someone should clear up! It stinks!». I show them the painting room we will work in, they put down their bags and greet Vilde, the headmaster. We begin by getting to know the building. I mention that as this used to be a marzipan factory, we will also work with marzipan in the final session, and maybe eat it too!

It's old building on four floors, with many different workshop spaces. Some rooms are full of busy art students, others are empty. There are paintings, canvases, mess and some art work in progress. My students rush through the rooms, very curious, letting their hands touch everything. Stian is very anxious and quickly announces that being here is difficult for him; that he can't tackle this situation very much longer. Back in our allotted workshop space there are four tables with printing paper taped



over each table top. The thinking is that we shall move from table to table, to create a sense of moving forward and also a way of marking the time.

We start at table number one, where I take about twenty everyday objects out for the students to observe. I have chosen objects with very different characteristics; varied surfaces, porous, hard, smooth, soft, hairy. The students are invited to put name tags on them if they like; neat small name tags with string. On the name tags they should describe the surface, function, and possibly pattern of each object. There is a long period of inquisitiveness and focus. Now comes the first task. I bring out a new bag with circular objects in various sizes; for example a cooking pot lid, a plate, an LP, the bottom of a bottle, and I spread these out over another table. I ask the students to draw circles around them. They will make up the shapes of the planets. The circles can be coloured in and they can write their names in them. The teachers help to cut them out. Elling only wants to draw if he can draw a smiling face in the circle. I ask, «is it the man in the moon»? At once he draws some lines coming out of the circle and says «it's the hair in the moon!» We laugh. Donna doesn't draw planets, instead she draws a little Manga character called «Kobe».



Image 4. Planets and marzipan, Project school, Oslo. H.Sundby, 2015

The teacher says she has a nice powerpoint presentation with the same character in. Knut draws circles, colours them and gives the planets individual characteristics such as; nice, strong, funny, which he writes on them. It becomes obvious that Knut is fascinated by the planets. He knows their names, their colours, sizes and the distances between them etc. Stian is by now conversing in a nonsensical mix of German and English: «I am the captain on the boat, ich bin der fuhrer!» He then begins to howl. It's decided that a teacher will take him back to their school. I show pictures of planets in a large colourful book. The first session is over. Only now do I understand approximately their real level of learning.

### **Second session: Scaffold building and collaboration**

We repeat the warm up from the first table. We study and label several objects. I repeat the use of categories: surface, function and pattern. I want these categories to be filled with descriptions. We move to table three, the students use paint rollers and lay down a dark, blue-black base colour. I tell the students this painting will be called «the Universe». Using the roller, the paper is soon covered. Vilde and myself have cut out circles and ellipses before hand, in heavy card. The students can also cut out shapes if they prefer. We also have the planets we cut out on day one. I lay these on the fourth table. The students paint the ellipses and circles, occasionally adding some details; earth, water and red sand. Donna starts with the earth, choosing a tiny circular card, she works with a brush in minute detail as if it is a pencil.



At a certain point, some students want to use a green colour. I have purposely not provided a green paint. I pour out onto the table a generous helping of loose blue and a yellow paint. I ask the students to try and mix the two colours. There is great general surprise when the two colours combine to become green. The teachers love the idea of allowing the students to make up colours. Then we return to the large painting, which is now dry.

We will do some splashing/dripping techniques on the surface, using lots of water and pale pink/yellow colours. Donna is filmed as she starts to paint, dancing with her whole body, dripping paint rhythmically like a drummer. She also decorates her hands with delicate patterns. Now the manga character Kobe, is forgotten!

The theoretic part of this session will be the discussion of a new, but relevant artwork. Vilde has bought some buns. Whilst they eat the buns, I tell them about Jackson Pollock and his famous drip paintings and performances. He was important for my own «awakening» and understanding of modern art. I show them some pictures from my laptop. Evaluation: I ask the students what they liked doing best, and what they think they learnt today. «It was fun doing The Universe», says Elling. «Doing the performance!» says Donna.

The painting is left to dry. The students wash the paint brushes and their hands. The atmosphere is good, there is a nice sense of trust between us all. They leave feeling a sense of accomplishment, looking forward to the next session.



Image 5. Planets and marzipan, Project school, Oslo, H.Sundby, 2015

### **Third session: Marzipan flowers on unknown planets**

The large painting (Universe) from the previous session is now dry. We prepare to glue the ellipses and circles (planets) onto the Universe painting completing the painting.

#### **Task 1: wall painting (2m X 3m)**

The students will work with the same tasks as before, but this time on a wall hanging, in a larger format with wide brushes. Two artists document the process (film and photo).

This time we will use two primary colours; blue and red to create purple. I have laid a line on the floor. The students can run up to the line, but not past it. From there they have to throw or splash the paint from their brushes onto the wall painting.

The session builds on the positive energy from the previous session, and their memories of Pollocks splash paintings. It is time for their own creativity to blossom. Elling gets depressed as he isn't pleased with his running technique. The task proved to be too much for him. We drop the distance challenge. They can now go right up to the painting if they want.

## Task 2: Marzipan flowers

This task builds on our first session. I remind them that I said we would work with marzipan and that maybe we would even eat what we made. The students sit in a ring on the floor together with their teachers. In the centre is an island of grease paper with icing sugar, marzipan and food colouring bottles.



Image 6. Planets and marzipan, Project school, Oslo, H.Sundby, 2015

## Observation

The students are shown a simple technique for making roses out of thin rolls of marsipan. The process is slightly messy, and also quite challenging but the teachers help them through it. This task has taken the children beyond their comfort zone.

The space we have been using is very large. Much larger than they are used to. I was curious to see, how this would affect the children, and what they created within such a space, using very overdimensioned tools and such a huge canvas.

I liked the fact that in this session (with the marsipan in the floor circle) we occupied the last remaining unused area in this huge room. We now 'owned' the whole space. For these children physical space is a well known challenge. In my own experience with my daughter, they often prefer to limit their physical spaces, and will not stray from well known pathways. In their daily lives at school, the majority of students (at this level of autism) tend to use only their own private rooms (which are very small).

Towards the end of this session, I show them video work by GuriGuri Henriksen; 'Marsipan behind', and a selection of photos from one of my own pieces called 'Egg Milk and Sugar'. My intention was to highlight the contrasting scales of the Universe, the planets and the minutiae, sensory objects.

## Task 3: Framing and owning

I have prepared two cardboard frames for each student. One 50 X 60cm and one 10 X 15cm. Lying on the floor, each student, with the help of their teachers, sign, title and date each frame as neatly as they can.

Using the frames, they are asked to find two sections of either The Universe painting, or the large scale wall painting, which they want to take home. They do this with their teachers. Having chosen each segment, they pinned their frames to the each painting. (Later I would frame each segment and deliver it to the school at a later date). Interestingly, Donna decides not to chose her character Kobe, from the painting.

## Reflection

*"A teaching artist (artist-educator) is a practicing professional artist with the complementary skills and sensibilities of an educator, who engages people in learning experiences in, through or about the arts."* (Booth, 2010, p.2)

Being, and working in the art college was in itself a challenge three of the four students managed well. Both teachers and students were challenged by participating in the project. They took public transport (something they would not normally do) to work in a new part of town and an unknown physical space. Not having enough prior knowledge of the students learning levels, was a worry to start with, but I think the slow warm up, helped overcome those concerns. An artist may not have the pedagogy, but tends to be very authentic in their teaching, enabling the students to have a more direct experience of the creative process, than perhaps a teacher would manage. The artist can show physically and with their actions how they relate to the materials; show how familiar they are with them and how they can be transformed. It's my experience that the students can experience a mastering of materials, in new and surprising ways, due to the fluid nature of the artists approach. For example Donna was both self aware and very proud that she had not just practiced art, but in the process embraced being 'a performing artist'. With these young students, I felt we achieved a level safety, playfulness and trust together as a group. I was reminded of my earlier teachings at the art academy, working with adults, and think now that achieving these simple aims, has always been a primary goal for me.



Image 7. Planets and marzipan, Project school, Oslo, H.Sundby, 2015

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 A mothers hopeful documentation of five years in the inner familysphere where the youngest daughter slowly develop autism.

## **Writer Biography**

Heidi Sundby, born 1965 in Oslo, is an independent professional artist who lives and works in Oslo, Norway. She is educated in Florence, Italy and Oslo, and received a MA in Fine Art from the



Norwegian Art Academy 1998. She works with photography, film, text and projectbased artproduction and has written about, and exhibited, artworks over several years. She was an educator at Bergen University of Applied Sciences 1998-2002. Her film "The Hummingchild" (doc, 28 min, 2012), is showed on international filmfestivals around the world and won international reward for best short documentary in *Picture this..* film festival, Calgary, Canada, 2013. The film is also used on educational purposes in hospital, where Heidi is lecturing parents with newborn children with severe damages. Sundby was one of the initiators and builders of the Foundation Bjørka (1998), a workshop space for camerabased artists, mostly women in the beginning. Bjørka has been important for a long range of visual artist over years, and is today partly supported financially by norwegian founds (Norsk Kulturråd and BKH). Bjørka celebrates twenty years jubileum this year.

Upcoming project (2018-2020: The Hummingchild - Part Two : Agnes is now 14 years old. She is still without words. The contrast between her strong and weak sides gains new directions and expression. The mother attende workshops on autism and selfhelp seminars, whilst the father continues building his atelier. They will divorce. The mother needs to go back to work after 10 years at home. She decides to send Agnes away to an institution. With a camera on the mothers' shoulder, this story will continue a couple of years