

by Mark Brend

# See things differently

*"I think it is great, art. I like doing it at home, anywhere."*

Nicholas Selway – Artists First

Try finding pithy, succinct, definitions of art, the purpose of art, or the value of human creativity and you quickly run into trouble. Not because they are hard to find, but because there are so many to choose from. From the evolutionary ("without art, our world would have remained a jungle", Bernard Berenson), to the personal ("the purpose of art is washing the dust of daily life off our souls", Ralph Waldo Emerson), to the religious ("all great art is praise", John Rushkin), and all points between and beyond, there has been almost as much discussion about art as there has been art itself. Which adds up to an inescapable conclusion that, whatever art is, it is both integral to the human experience, and many things to many people.

Art helps us make sense of the world and ourselves. We communicate through art. It is fun. And it can even be a way to earn money.

In the UK, art draws together millions: amateurs and professionals, young and old, and from all cultures. The Arts Council will have invested £1.1 billion of public money from Government, and the National Lottery from 2006 to the end of 2008. And apart from the world of funded arts, there are countless individuals, private companies and voluntary groups chipping in to the creative melee of artistic life. From the great cultural centres in our big cities to the village hall down the road, from the traditional local newspaper to the newest interactive website, there are, as you read this, thousands of people appreciating and enjoying the creative work of thousands of other people.

## Fitting in

In the learning disabilities world there is much talk of previously disadvantaged people joining the mainstream of life, of being included in their communities and society as a whole, of escaping the social, emotional and financial impoverishment

**Boundless – Connecting Artists was a unique group exhibition that ran for a week in July at Bankside Gallery, London. Many of the artists featured have learning disabilities**



that has traditionally blighted so many lives. These are sentiments that most reading this article would assent to readily. Yet they beg the question, if making and enjoying art is such an integral part of human life – of adding value, and meaning and pleasure to our lives – where do people with learning disabilities fit in? Well, sadly, the answer is that all too often they do not fit in anywhere at all. Or, if they do, it is in a learning disabilities subculture rarely penetrated by anyone who does not belong to that same subculture. In art, as in life, people with learning disabilities inhabit the margins. A sorry state of affairs that a recent exhibition of visual art in central London set out to challenge.

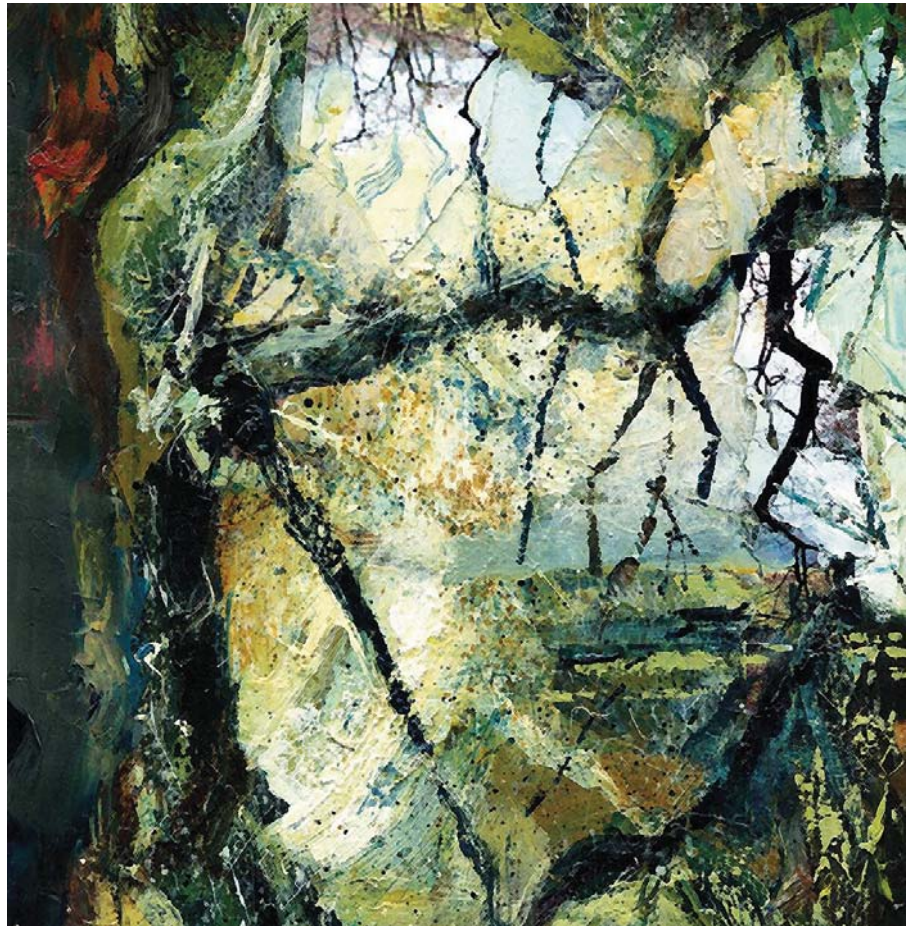
Boundless – Connecting Artists was a unique group exhibition that ran for a

week in July at Bankside Gallery, next to the Thames in central London. It was conceived to introduce the work of artists from all over England, many of whom have learning disabilities, to the wider artistic community, by exhibiting them in a prominent London gallery alongside non-disabled artists. It featured an eclectic range of approximately 70 works, including photography, abstract and figurative painting, drawing, digital art and cartoons.

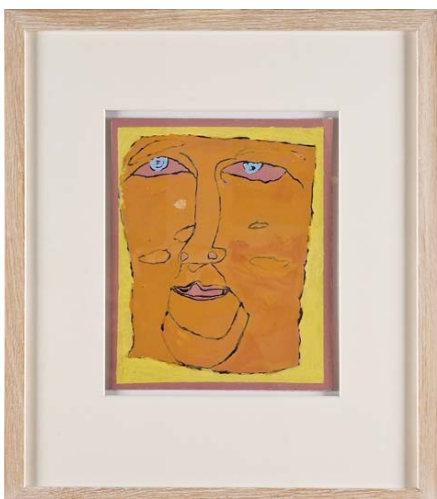
From its inception, the idea was that Boundless would play by the rules of the art world, not the world of learning disabilities services. It would be organized and presented as any other art exhibition  
**Text continues on p18**  
**See overleaf for some of the artworks featured in the exhibition**



***“Art makes you see things differently and that includes yourself.”  
– NICHOLAS SELWAY***



*“Art is a transformative force for everyone. Art can have an amazing effect. We’re seeing that in action here today.”*  
– JEREMY HUNT





Former newsreader Martyn Lewis at the private view

would be. Firstly a 'call to artists' was circulated, initially to people supported by the four learning disability agencies that sponsored the exhibition – Choice Support, United Response, Regard Partnership and the Skillnet Group work – and then further a field. A small panel of professional artists and art teachers led by curator Claire Wiltsher assessed all submissions, and work was chosen strictly on merit.

### Involvement

The involvement of arts professionals did much to give Boundless its unique flavour. The panel had no previous involvement with the learning disabilities world, and knew none of the artists who were putting their work forward. They just looked at the hundreds of works placed before them and chose the ones they thought were worthy of display.

It was a rigorous process, with about one in 10 works submitted actually selected. So rigorous was the process, in fact, that at one point it was by no means certain that there would be enough work to make an exhibition. This crisis was averted when Artists First, a small but established organisation based in Bristol that is led by artists with learning disabilities, was invited to participate. Ten members of that group supplied sufficient work to fill the remaining wall space. In total 25 artists exhibited at Boundless, from teenagers to adults in their 70s, disabled and non-disabled. Some of these already work professionally, while for others exhibiting at Boundless marked the first step into the public arena.

With the selection process complete, all Boundless art was professionally framed, priced and hung, and shown to the public at Bankside Gallery, home to the Royal Watercolour Society and the Royal Society of Painter-Printmakers. As its name suggests, Bankside Gallery is on the South Bank of the Thames, close to the Royal Festival Hall and next to the Tate Modern. It is ideally positioned to attract passers-by on cultural tours of London and office workers on their lunch-breaks, in addition to the people who set out specially to see whatever the gallery has on offer.

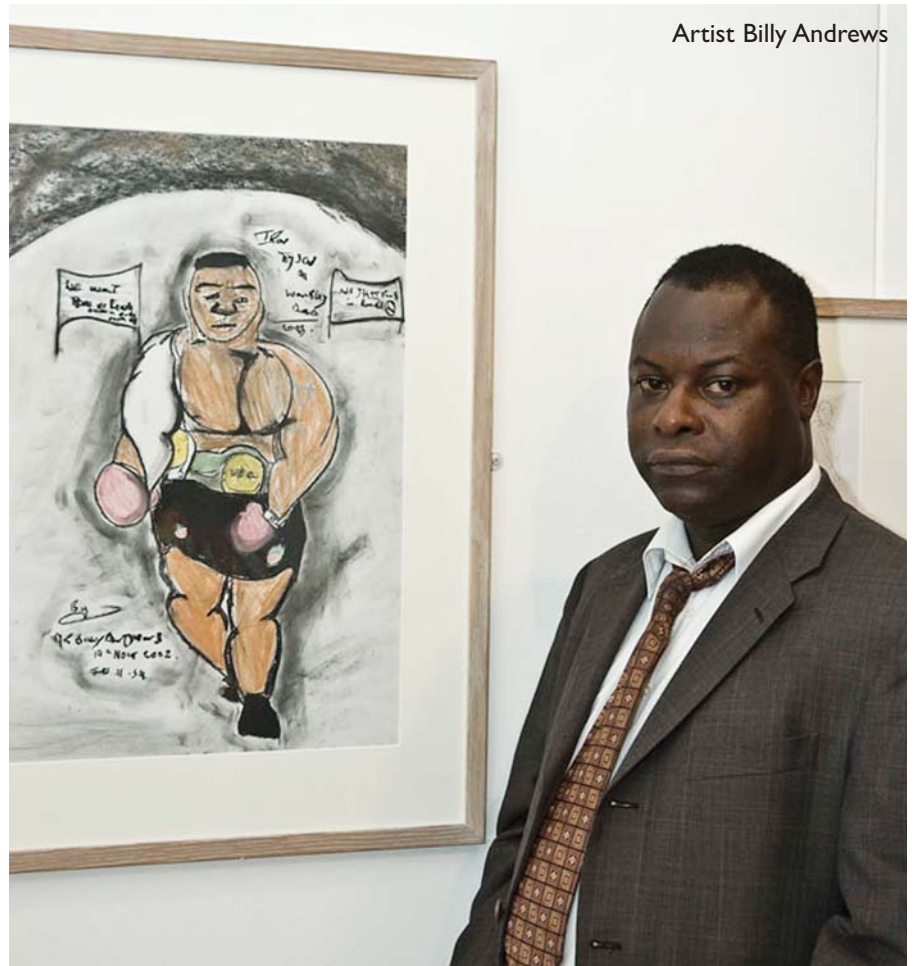
In the case of Boundless there were quite a few in this last category, as the national press noticed the exhibition. The Guardian set up an on-line gallery, and art publication Art Of England ran a feature article. Additionally, many of the artists selected were the subject of news stories in their local papers, and the exhibition appeared in dozens of 'what's on' listings. More than a thousand people attended the exhibition, and a spokesperson for the gallery declared it "very successful ... the range of art work allowed the visitor to recognise talent - not disability."

A private view hosted by United

Response President, Martyn Lewis brought together many of the exhibiting artists, their friends and families. The Shadow Culture Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, addressed the gathering, saying: "Art is a transformative force for everyone. Art can have an amazing effect. We're seeing that in action here today."

This sentiment was echoed by Nicholas Selway from Artists First, who said: "Art makes you see things differently and that includes yourself."

Now that all of the pictures have been taken down from the walls, how should Boundless be assessed? Did it make anyone see things differently? Hopefully it did help people understand that learning disability needn't be a barrier to artistic talent. But really that is secondary. More important is that work was sold and profiles were raised, including that of one artist who was, as a direct result of the exhibition, approached by a magazine interested in publishing a series of his cartoons. Boundless gave some talented artists an opportunity to reach a new audience, to take part in cultural life, to get themselves noticed. Just what any artist wants an art exhibition to do.



Artist Billy Andrews