

WINTER FIRES

Art and agency in old age

Old age haunts the human imagination. Nowadays, it also haunts the politics, sociology, medicine and economics of an ageing world. Art has taken age as a subject since ancient times, giving its unique insights into other experiences. And artists have always shown that ageing does not mean stopping or even slowing down.

Winter Fires explores how the practice of art can change not the fact but the experience of old age. Art confers agency on its creator. It offers a capacity to act in the world by making something that did not exist before.

The book is based on conversations with artists of all kinds who, whatever else retirement has brought, are as creative as ever. Illustrated with portraits by Mik Godley, *Winter Fires* offers an unusual, optimistic glimpse of creative ageing.



Winter Fires

Art and agency in old age

The Baring Foundation

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François Matarasso

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With drawings by Mik Godley

Baring Foundation

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Art and agency in old age

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First words

A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Aristotle, 335 BCE

When Edward Said died in 2003 he was known and admired, not only as a literary theorist, but as a public intellectual. A gifted musician, he had founded with Daniel Barenboim the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, which brings together young musicians from Israel, Palestine and nearby lands. He died young by today's standards. At 67, he was not far advanced into the third age. Nevertheless he had begun to turn his mind, in a series of essays and lectures, to the experience of art in old age, which he called 'Late Style'.

His thought on this subject is rich and complex, and will be alluded to again. But one of its roots is the recognition, expressed long ago by Aristotle in his *Art of Poetry*, that a story must have a beginning, a middle and an end. And human lives, whatever else they may be, are stories.

They are the stories our parents tell us about our origins and the time before memory. They are the stories we tell ourselves as we acquire language and develop self-awareness. They are the stories others tell about us, while we are still alive and afterwards. Each one of these complex, overlapping, fluid and unstable stories is an attempt to make sense of our own lives—even when they are about someone else's.

Edward Said saw human beings as engaged in a 'self-making process' that was defined by 'three great human episodes common to all human cultures and traditions.' The first of these is experi-

enced in childhood and youth. It focuses on origin, the starting point in time and space that defines both the possibilities and the limits that will shape a life. The middle concerns the unfolding of that potential, how adult actions fulfil or fail to fulfil the promise of youth, how a character is shaped by its history. The third, final episode is the story's end, the descent of the dramatic arc in which resolution is achieved or denied, meaning found, lost or perhaps both. Sense is made, in the end. Sometimes, it is also true.

It is this stage of an artist's life, shadowed often by illness and always by mortality, that leads to the work Said calls *Late Style*. But the physical effects of age and nearness to the end are only part of the story, and perhaps not the most important or interesting. What comes last, in the continuing search for sense, is necessarily, inescapably, in dialogue with all that has come before—with origins, hopes and potential, with actions taken and avoided, with people known, loved and lost, with success, triumph, failure, sadness and everything that makes up a life. It is not surprising that memory is so important when it is, in Paul McCartney's image, 'almost full'. Where youth's vacancy was a promise that middle age hoped to fulfil, old age has the challenge of making sense of what has been, in the knowledge of what must come. It is the end of the story and bears the responsibility of bringing the whole, if possible, to a satisfactory conclusion.

Thus can the story of Shakespeare's serenity or Beethoven's struggle be told in how their last works are interpreted: *Late Style*.

Children and young people want to be thought older than they are because with adulthood comes agency—the ability to act autonomously in the world, to make our own decisions, to pursue our desires, to write our own story. And it is the loss of agency, above all through mental incapacity, that is most feared as old age advances.

Art is a remarkable source of agency. Through its practice, human beings bring meanings into the world, impose interpreta-

tions on it and find common spirits. Through its practice, they persuade, seduce or frighten others into sharing their imaginations. Through its practice they act and they induce others to act.

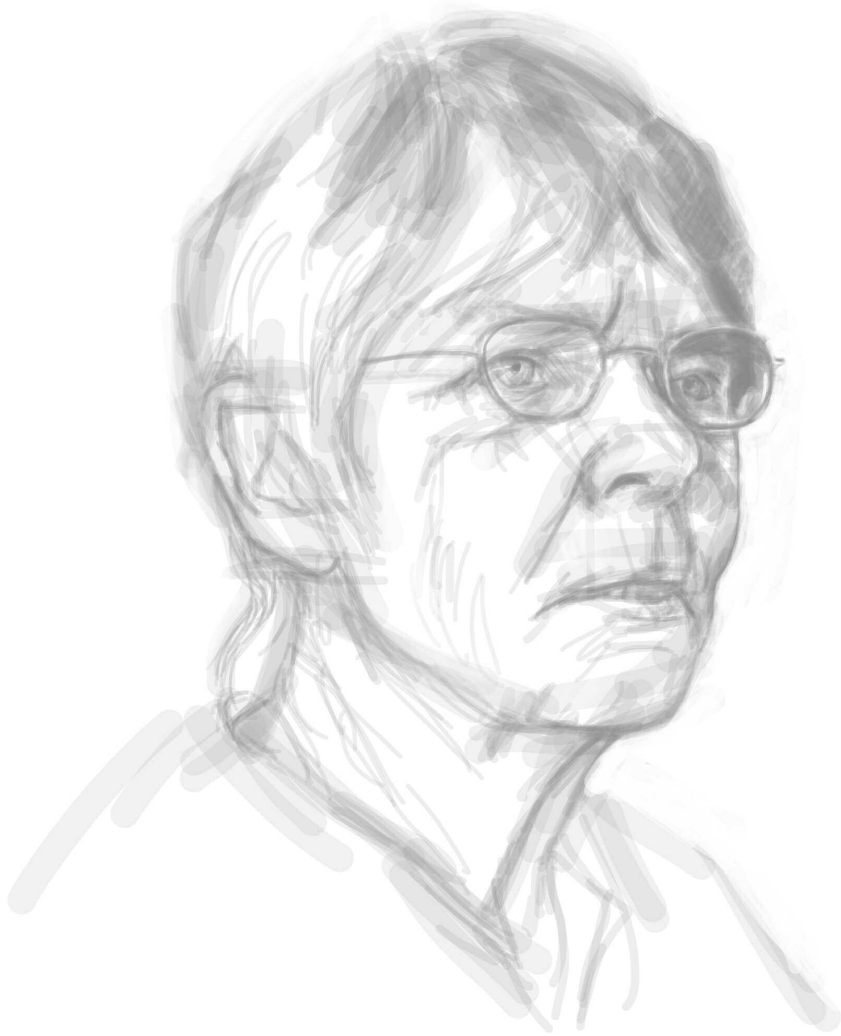
Shakespeare and Beethoven are rare. But a capacity to create, to acquire and to use artistic skill, is in all human beings, including those who do nothing to develop it after primary school. Art is a capacity for agency that, as the conversations described in the central part of this book show, can continue throughout life, can flourish, indeed, in old age and can help preserve individuality and autonomy to the very end.

This book is not concerned with whether old people who engage in art practice live longer or healthier lives, whether they make new friends or even whether they are happier. There is evidence to suggest that all of these are true, but my interest here is in a simpler, more basic question: whether having an identity and a practice as an artist helps people retain a sense of agency in old age.

Does the ability to make art, of whatever kind, scale or ambition, change the experience of ageing? Does it help that process of self-making described by Edward Said, through which we become ourselves?

Beginning:

Finding stories



1 Age and agency

‘A marvellous freedom’

Few places in England are quite as reserved as a Devon valley. Hedges tower over deep lanes, obscuring fields and houses and slowing drivers to the speed of a pony and trap. The land imposes its own unhurried pace. Even in winter, everything seems green, healthy: spring could be round the corner. When people talk of retiring to the country, this is often what they have in mind: a cottage, a garden, a quiet life.

Sally Cottis first came to Devon with a young family. An artist from the start, she trained at the Slade in London and did well before marriage and children changed her course.

‘I ended up with three children under five and there really wasn’t time for anything but them. I found it very, very frustrating. I spent as much time as I could drawing the children but obviously they got fed up. I used to get inside the playpen with the easel and paints, and let them rampage outside. It worked, but only for a certain time.’

What followed, as for so many women artists, was a life in which other people’s needs often came before her own. Beyond the family, she began teaching disabled children and adults part time. It was satisfying, enjoyable work but left little space for her own painting. Only later, her children grown and gone—along with many of the ideas she’d once had about herself as an artist—was she able to re-

turn seriously to her own practice. And even then, in a flat, work and other realities had limited her time to paint.

Retirement: that changed everything. Finally, she had the three essentials of an artist's life: money, time and space. For Sally, the state pension has been like the private incomes that often sustained artists and writers in the past. In the 1930s, a few hundred a year was enough to put a roof over your head and bread on the table. It was a meagre sufficiency to those who wanted more comfort in life, but that small, secure income bought time and space to work.

'When you get to be old, you get your old age pension and, for most of us, that actually makes it happen. And it's a huge difference. It really is.'

In her seventies, Sally Cottis is at last able to concentrate on her art. She can draw on the knowledge, skills and sensibility of decades. She knows what she wants to paint, how and why. She is at the height of her powers, just at that time when convention expects a slowing down, even an end to professional interests.

A garden shed serves as a studio and she has access to printing facilities. As a member of the local '21 Group' of artists, she has peers, a critical context and opportunities to exhibit. (She also stresses the role of a supportive partner in her present situation.) Freed from a need to sell, she feels able to make the work she wants, in the way she wants: if it takes time, so be it.

'If you can hang on to your health and your energy, you've got a good 20 years of that kind of freedom, which is brilliant. If it doesn't come right this time, it doesn't matter; I shall have another chance. And if I just want to do one particular picture over and over again, it doesn't matter. I don't have to start painting something else just because people are sick of looking at trees. I can do it as long as I want to do it. And that's a marvellous freedom.'

Winter Fires

'Loss is loss, and nothing is gained by calling it by a nicer name'

Tony Judt, 2010

A book about artists in old age faces many traps, starting with its defining language. Old is such a blunt word, brutal even. English has a world of euphemism to avoid its negative associations: mature, senior, older even—anything to keep us connected with the vital young and hold off the losses that come with age.

These losses are real and they can be terrible. Loss of wealth; loss of status; loss of strength; loss of memory; loss of continence; loss of dignity; loss of life itself. Margaret Overton says that 'growing old is not for sissies', a contemporary rephrasing of a sentiment old as mankind, and foolish to deny. The trap of gloom is ever present in writing about old age. The reader turns away: there are happier things to think about.

No less to be avoided, though, is the trap of simple-minded optimism, particularly when it depends on a refusal to admit hard truths. This book, in exploring how the practice of art can improve the *experience* of ageing, might be specially vulnerable to that. Humanity lives in hope and there are many who want to wear purple and rage against the dying of the light, or ignore it altogether.

Between the Scylla of despair and Charybdis of blind optimism lies a narrow path traced by those who see old age as it is and find no less humanity there than in any other stage of life. In her work with the dying, Dame Cicely Saunders showed how to value each person as a unique individual. Her insistence on that value up to the moment of death itself is powerful precisely because of its hopeful realism.

Personhood is expressed in our actions, our agency in the world. The dignity of the self depends on being able to say what we believe, what we feel, what we want—and sometimes to keep silence, which

is its own form of agency. The world may not listen; if it does, it may not hear what we thought we said or respond as we intended.

But it matters that we have spoken—to us, but not only to us. In the act of speech, broadly defined, we make events happen, or we try to make them happen, according to our values and beliefs. They may not be big events. They may not be important to other people. But in exercising agency we are truly human and not only the objects of other people's wills.

Artists exercise a particular kind of agency. Through music, performance, images and words, artists try to make, tell, embody and enact sense from experience. Their work creates meanings, especially those too complex, dangerous or unclear to put into everyday language. More than that, the creation of art is an act in the world, an utterance that brings into being something that did not previously exist. That creation may have physical presence, in the form of a painting, a sculpture or a pot; equally, it may be a performance that exists only when it is happening, or a text that awakes only when it is read or heard. The form matters less than the existence of the artwork, causing events to happen in reality.

If art is a form of agency, it might become increasingly important as we get older and begin losing other capacities for action, once taken for granted. A person who has, through the practice of art, nurtured their expressive skills, imagination and creativity will be able to draw on those resources to the very end. So perhaps the practice of art, whether by lifelong professionals or by amateurs who turned to art only after retirement from other work, offers real benefits to those undergoing the complex experience of growing old, if only by enabling them to tell their own story themselves.

Winter Fires is a journey into the territory of old age, in conversation with some artists who have preceded me there. (Philip Larkin suggested in his late poem, *Aubade*, that only death was certain, but old age—saving an early death—is equally inevitable.)

Over the past year I have spent time with artists who are in their sixties, seventies and eighties. Their situations varied. Some lived in large cities such as London, Belfast and Bristol; others in towns, villages or remote houses in different regions. Some lived with partners or families, others alone; most were independent but some used sheltered accommodation or residential care. All knew the physical effects of ageing but, while the lives of some artists were significantly affected by it, others enjoyed good health. Their age accounted for few of these variations.

We spoke about their lives then and now, and their feelings about growing older, about artistic practice and careers, about early hopes and new discoveries, circling back to talk about what art had meant to them in the past and what it meant now, when they knew, and the world told them, they had reached the 'third age'. Each conversation told the unique experience of an individual; each was an evocative, impressive, moving story. What appears in these pages is, necessarily, a mere fraction of those rich lives.

Although everyone I met is described here as an artist, there was a wide range of practice and expertise, and several of them would be uncomfortable with the title. They were painters, dancers, musicians, writers and actors, working in various traditions. Some had known their vocation early, had studied it in college and had spent decades in professional work. Their careers were as varied as the rest of their lives, with periods of success and fallow times, while art practice fitted around other, more remunerative work and life's everyday demands and occupations.

Others had an early passion for music, acting or drawing but had been forced by poverty or family circumstance to take more reliable career paths. Only in retirement had they finally been able to fulfil long-cherished creative ambitions. Others still had no thought of art until, through the accidents and changes that come with ageing, they found themselves discovering new ways of being and new aspects of themselves.

But in every case it is their artistic activity that is important here, because it gives a singular and shared character to their experience of ageing: it is as artists that they appear in *Winter Fires*.

The distinction between professional and amateur artists is entrenched in Western culture, for reasons discussed in the first book in this series, *Where we Dream*. But whatever meaning it may have in middle life, after retirement the classification seems less real, including to some artists who are, in the art world's eyes, entirely professional. When a person's principal source of income is a pension rather than their earnings through work, a distinction between professionals and amateurs has to draw on other ideas. Rosie Martin, a St Martin's graduate with a rich career, has also spent many years teaching amateurs and, while she is clear that there is a difference, she says '*professional is about attitude*'. It is the way in which an artist undertakes their practice that is important, not the legitimacy conferred or withheld by the art world or by markets.

But there is a further reason why separating older artists into professionals and amateurs is unhelpful in the present discussion. The experience of a professional artist in her seventies may have more in common with that of an amateur artist of the same age than with that of her mid-life peers. The art world pays little attention to old artists unless, like Christopher Lee (b. 1922), Bridget Riley (b. 1931) or Aretha Franklin (b.1942), they have already achieved a bankable stature. There is also a common cultural experience, a history and a range of references, that connects people of the same generation in endless conscious and unconscious ways. But most of all, the experience of being 75, including how it leads others to see one, is not that of being 45.

It does not therefore follow that standards or aesthetics are meaningless: simply that they are not central to a discussion of how art might confer agency. Artists as great in their fields as Franklin, Lee and Riley have acquired a high degree of agency through their imagination and talent—certainly far more than most people of the

same age. But agency is also gained by less celebrated and gifted artists. It may be no less important to an individual fighting for dignity in the face of the effects of ageing because it occurs in the smaller arena of their community, family or residential home.

I use the word 'old', partly to avoid adopting a plethora of vague alternatives that range from euphemism to evasion and partly so as not to concede sole possession of the word to its negative associations. Old age, for present purposes, is simply what comes after middle age, which in turn follows youth. It implies no more judgement than do those terms, but brings as many cultural associations as do they. Such associations, good and bad, fair and unfair, cannot be avoided: they form our minds.

Old age, then, is used here to indicate the period after retirement, the third age, after youth and working life. But there are as many old ages as there are childhoods, as there are people. The experiences related here are individual. Everyone's story is their own and it signifies only them. The patterns we see are just that: our human need to find wider meaning in everything. It does not follow that no wider understanding can be drawn from these singular experiences, and I do so where it seems justified, but always aware that such generalisations are rooted in individual lives.

'What I do is not art therapy. Therefore it has to be thought about. It has to be composed and it has to be done, rather than being pure instinct.'

Rosie Martin

Finally, it should be said that there is no consideration here of the possible therapeutic benefits of arts practice in old age. Having acquired powerful medical knowledge and resources, we are now inclined to see the difficult aspects of human experience as problems to be solved. Our ancestors, with less confidence in their control

over life, tended to see these experiences philosophically. The difference is evident in the modern approach to old age. Ageing is not a disease, although, like youth and middle age, it may be accompanied by disease. The demands of growing old are primarily human, not medical: physical weakness, bereavement and loss, loneliness, fear of death and so on. Their mitigation lies less in drugs or surgery than in how we conduct ourselves, individually and collectively.

Art therapy is generally offered to people who are ill. It is well established in health care and supported by extensive research. But a core principle of therapy is diagnosis of a condition that the intervention can be reasonably expected to improve or cure. A person who has suffered a stroke can benefit from dance or art workshops that help restore mobility or hand and eye coordination.

The benefits of an art practice, including those described in the middle section of this book, are important, but they are not remedies. There is no end to the things that are good for us, from eating well to playing chess, from dancing to studying the solar system, from walking in the countryside to being loved. They are, in all their variety of nature and importance, constituents of human wellbeing and we seek out those that make us happy and enrich our lives. But there is a fundamental difference between things that are good for us, whatever our state of health or our personal problems, and things that can make us better when we are ill.

The confusion about art being good for us, in the sense of life enhancing, and being good for us in the sense of curing medical conditions, is endemic in how policy makers and others imagine art in society, at least where it concerns those they consider to have, or to be, problems. Governments now see art programmes as means to alleviate complex social phenomena, such as youth crime, that they are unable or unwilling to address in other ways. Participation in the arts can be a very positive experience for young people but it does not follow that the purpose of such opportunities can (or should) be reduced to a prescription for social ills.

Similar ambiguities are evident in discussion of art and older people, especially if we see old age as a problem in itself. No time of life is inherently bad. Old age has as much potential for human happiness as any other: some of the artists I spoke to compared it favourably with their teenage years, their thirties or their fifties.

Arts practice has immense value to human wellbeing, but that value cannot be controlled or directed. Art can only be experienced by individual people who will make of it what they choose. Happily, what they make of it enriches their lives, as the experiences of the artists described here illustrate, and often to the most profound degree.



2 The way you tell it

Frightening ourselves silly

The 'marvellous freedom' described by Sally Cottis is not an unusual experience in old age today, especially, but by no means only, among people in good health. Most of the artists I met spoke in similar terms, though each in their own way and from their own, varied experience. Similarly positive accounts of age can be found in the scientific literature and in the discourse of older people and their organisations.

And yet, it is increasingly hard to read a newspaper or listen to a current affairs programme without encountering some dreadful story of old age and its problems. If it is not the demand placed on public services by an increasing older population or inadequate pensions, it is the neglect old people suffer in care homes or the diseases that take them off. Although these stories are told as if they concerned some remote, alien people, there is at the same time an unspoken recognition that this concerns us all, and directly. That is what gives the stories their *frisson*.

There are two dominant stories of ageing in today's media: one catastrophic and global, the other terrible and personal. They feed off and strengthen one another. They need to be told partly because they are so present, even when unacknowledged, in how we think and speak about old age, but also because they are used to discount more positive understandings of it. This is what things are like, they imply: face reality or be dismissed as a Pollyanna.

The time bomb

Proportion of European population aged over 65 in 1975: 10.7%.

Proportion of European population aged over 65 in 2025: 18.1%.

WHO World Atlas of Ageing, 1998

One story of ageing can be seen as part of humanity's long-standing terror of total eclipse—the end of everything that has been expressed in apocalyptic visions across millennia. The cause may be ascribed to a malevolent or disgusted deity sweeping all away in flood or inferno; to humanity's own ignorance and greed, turning a sustaining land into desert or nuclear wasteland; or simply to nature erasing a transitory species as the by-product of its own processes. Every civilisation has its nightmares of extinction, including ours. It is no comfort to know that none has yet come to pass, at least for humanity as a whole: it need only happen once.

The spectre of overpopulation has stalked modernity since Malthus and, although the planet supports numbers he never thought possible, the idea that humanity will breed, eat and fight itself to death remains potent. The new twist is that people will stop dying fast enough to make space for the new generations.

It is surely to be celebrated that human beings have longer, healthier lives than ever, not just in prosperous, developed countries but everywhere. Public health and medicine, good food, leisure and education: the combined benefits of science, technology and the welfare state have given us years unimagined by our grandparents. Centenarians, once seen as almost mysterious beings, are becoming commonplace.

The ageing world is described by Sarah Harper, Director of the Oxford Institute of Population Ageing, as being 'along with climate change, *the* challenge for the 21st century [...] that affects all aspects of all our lives.'

It does indeed affect everything. In some fields, such as health, social care and pensions, the challenges are obvious and widely de-

bated. In others, such as the built environment or the arts, there is not the same awareness or urgency. How might an older population, needing more heat in winter and less in summer, affect energy policy at a time of climate change? We do not know.

In the past, dependents were children. The most cynical utilitarian could recognise an interest in caring for the young to ensure the continuation of the species or simply that there would be someone to care for them in old age. The mantra 'children are the future' remains central to most people's idea of a strong society.

But in an ageing world, more and more adults of middle age have dependent parents as well as, and sometimes in place of, dependent children. This situation presents a different moral challenge: where is our interest in being generous to the dependent old?

Gerontocide—the killing of the old when they are no longer of any use—features in the folk tales of many lands but has also been a historical reality. Even today, some cultures do not encourage the survival of the old, much less suffer their continued burden.

Lewis Wolpert, 2011

Professor Wolpert's statement shocks but cannot be dismissed. We discriminate against the old in ways that would cause outrage if they were applied to other groups. Denying people employment by imposing a compulsory retirement age is the most obvious. Given what we know about the positive benefits of being in work—much trumpeted by politicians where the young are concerned—the compensations offered by discounted public transport and theatre tickets may not make up the loss. Like other forms of discriminatory prejudice, ageism is masked by benevolent condescension. But it is real and experienced daily by old people with little power or agency. Passive injustice towards the old, for instance in the form of exclusion and neglect, is also widespread. It is no secret that cold

weather and heat waves produce thousands of preventable deaths among the old.

Where resources are limited, when people have different capacities to contribute to their creation and different levels of need, generosity is liable to be tested. The debates about an ageing population now taking place in political, academic and media circles reflect how societies try to balance competing needs, rights and beliefs. But those who struggle to be heard in those debates are always at risk of being written out of the story.

The gulag

At a societal, global level, the story of ageing is new and largely negative. Rather than celebrating historic improvements in the length and quality of human lives, or asking how the knowledge, skill and wisdom of old people might be used, it highlights decline and dependency. In doing so, it conforms to a much older story, traced back thousands of years, to the Egyptian courtier, Ptah-Hotep.

Old age has struck, age has descended,
Feebleness has arrived, weakness is here again.
Sleep is upon him in discomfort all day.
Eyes are grown small, ears deaf,
Mouth silent, unable to speak,
Heart emptied, unable to recall yesterday.
Bones ache his whole length.
Goodness has turned to evil,
All taste is gone.
What old age does to people is evil in every way.

Ptah-Hotep, 2400 BCE

We are still afraid of growing old. Even in an age of comfort and good dentistry, we view the gift of years as a mixed blessing. We fear being a pain to ourselves and a burden to others. We have even

begun to create legal ways of ending our own lives, when their duration exceeds their quality.

Certainly, old age can bring anxiety and distress. It increases the likelihood of illness, disability and, perhaps most frighteningly, of dementia. It brings daily closer the inescapable reality of death. Cicero rightly argued, good Stoic that he was, that these ills could strike at any moment, but he underestimated the difficulty with which the healthy animal imagines sickness. Damien Hirst (b. 1965) in titling his famous dead shark, 'The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living,' did not. But Cicero wrong is truer than Hirst right.

Apprehension of old age extends beyond our bodies to our social relations. Will we face poverty if our pensions are inadequate? Must we depend on children, friends or strangers for company, shopping or even personal care? Will we end our days in a shabby home or hospital, unaware, lonely, lost and vulnerable?

Such fears foresee a diminution of power—not over others, but power over ourselves, the autonomy we long for as children and teenagers on the threshold of adulthood. Ageing is typically experienced as a steady stripping away of agency, the capacity to act independently, on our own behalf and judgement. In old age, we stand like cashiered soldiers to be ritually humiliated as each insignia of rank and merit is torn off before the sword is finally snapped across the commandant's knee. There is nothing left but to leave the parade ground and find a dark place in which to die.

Retirement is the first loss: the end of work and all it means for identity, social networks, a sense of purpose and usefulness. Those whose occupation was a source of pleasure and fulfilment, might miss it most, but even those who disliked their job can come to like losing it less. The end of work brings a loss of income. Good pensions are exceptional and most people find their autonomy reducing with their spending power. This is not just a matter of consumer

choices. People on low and falling incomes may be unable to carry on with social activities or see family who live elsewhere.

Fifty-one per cent of all people aged 75 and over live alone; half of all older people (about 5 million) say that the television is their main form of company.

Campaign to End Loneliness, 2011

Declining health may bring dependency on others and a further erosion of autonomy. Even our right to make decisions can be withdrawn on the grounds of mental incapacity. The risk of dementia increases with age. Fewer than one person in a hundred develops the disease before 70; after 80, that chance increases to one in six. Dementia haunts old age, as it did King Lear: 'O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven, Keep me in temper: I would not be mad.' It is terrible even to a former war correspondent:

I listened in tears to a beautiful former actress who sang me a song, then sang it immediately again because she had forgotten what had happened the moment before. I found a lovely old lady wandering round on her own crying quietly to herself because she couldn't find the way out to go home to her parents.

John Simpson, 2012

Happily, many very old people, including those with dementia, are cared for by selfless and loving partners, children or family members. Their material circumstances are good and they have friends and interests. But for others, the poor, the helpless, the unwanted, we have been steadily building a parallel world of care services, residential homes and day centres that no one enters willingly. Insulated from the world of the young, it is, like the Gulag Archipelago, seen only by those sent there. Out of mind and out of sight.

Rewriting the story of old age

Between the time bomb and the gulag, the dominant stories of old age are relentlessly grim. And, being at least partly true, they are not easily dismissed. They have authority. They write themselves easily. Even so, they are not the whole truth and not the only truth. Focusing on aspects of ageing that frighten people, they naturally get attention. But the world is not composed only of terrors, real and imagined. We lose just what we want to preserve if fear prevents us from seeing it.

There are, there have always been, other stories, ones that see old age as a time of richness and fulfilment, an experience of deep and distinctive value that completes the natural course of a human life. They have often been associated with a religious or spiritual perspective and perhaps the present weakness of such outlooks has increased our doubts about the value of old age. What can it mean, with all its undoubted losses, if the end is no longer a time of reconciliation before the promise of another life?

Everyone answers such questions according to their own beliefs and experience. But other ways of understanding old age also exist, standing between grim materialism on the one hand and spiritual transcendence on the other.

One of those ways is through art and creative practice, which, for many, still offers Kant's promise of higher values. Despite its past conscription by totalitarian regimes and its current commodification by global corporations, art remains a powerful space of personal and shared liberty. Proof against lasting ideological control, it still offers people the means to imagine and articulate different stories, meanings and values. Art is a garden of forking paths, in which it is always possible both to get lost and to escape.

The generation that first benefited from the welfare state and changed so much as a result is now reaching old age. Its members are also the first people to anticipate a long, healthy and comfortable retirement—a promise of freedom and fulfilment. The values,

conduct and expectations that have shaped their lives now confront established ideas of old age and rewriting the story.

'We're not of the generation who need a hip replacement—no dentures, hearing aids or glasses or any of that. That was the theme behind my poetry: that we're still active.'

Monica McBride

The past 30 years have seen a flourishing of arts practice by older people. They are not amateurs in the traditional sense. They are unlike the Sunday painters and evening performers who have always enjoyed their art but been happy to fit it around work and family, for several reasons. One is the degree of commitment they often invest: as retired people, they can give as much time as they want to their art practice.

But the more important difference is that, like professional artists, they are interested in creating new work about their own ideas and experiences. They are often professionals in their performance of art, not because they are precious or self-important about it, but because of what they are trying to do with it.

And one of the things they are trying to do, sometimes very deliberately, is to rewrite the story of old age. Living it, they reject the old tales through which human fears of ageing have been expressed. Instead, they celebrate its freedoms, friendships and joys, without avoiding its griefs or its dangers.

In Northern Ireland, for example, scores of older people are involved in the Spring Chickens programme organised by Big Telly Theatre Company. Groups meet in Armagh, Belfast, Coleraine, L'Derry and Omagh, working with professional theatre makers to create new shows for enthusiastic audiences in local venues. In 2009, to support NI Age Awareness Week, five productions were staged simultaneously in five theatres, and also streamed online. Over three thousand people in 14 countries logged on over a two hour period to see their friends and relatives perform. The second

season of shows, in October 2010, explored utopia, giving participants a chance to dream a little. A year later, the Spring Chickens performed in schools, social and residential centres, streets and shopping centres, in shows with titles such as *Anti-Ageing Revolution*, *Growing Old*, *Growing Wild* and *Inside I am still 20!*

The Spring Chickens are one among scores of arts and performance companies run by, with and for older people today. Companies such as Entelchy Arts, Green Candle, Spare Tyre and Akademi Dance are innovators in both the arts and social enterprise. Institutions like Sadler's Wells, Sage and the Serpentine have creative programmes for older people. Festivals such as Bealtaine in Ireland, Capital Age in London and Luminare in Scotland present some of this work to a wider public.

Old people also perform in amateur companies, sing in choirs and play in rock bands. They organise their own arts activities, formal and informal, and teach one another. They are painters, writers, comedians and poets, sculptors, actors and storytellers. In all its diversity, this work often shares a common purpose in creating the best art possible that also challenges prejudice about ageing.

This mission is less evident in the work of professional artists who have reached old age. Painters such as Sally Cottis and Rosie Martin are simply continuing their practice and its concerns. But in doing so they also enact a belief in old age as a time of vitality, artistic development and agency.

The new creative lives people are making in their third age are as diverse in character and purpose as those who make them. It makes no more sense to speak of an art of old age than it does to speak of an art of youth. But, simply by pursuing their artistic interests in their seventies, eighties and nineties, the present generation is inevitably changing what it means to be old, transforming a state that had been characterised by social passivity into one that is animated and active. They are rewriting the story of ageing and the consequences will be important for their children and their children's children.



Middle:

Living stories



3 Artists in old age

When the old person is not the victim of economic and physiological conditions that reduce him to subhuman state, he remains the individual he has been throughout the change and impairment of the ageing process: to a large extent his last years depend upon those of his middle life.

Simone de Beauvoir, 1972

Artists are not a special type of human being. Like mountaineers, they practise an activity for which they have particular aptitude and, like those who climb mountain, most stay on well-tried routes, their explorations focusing on how to cross them rather than marking out new paths. The activity itself—the creation of art—does have special characteristics, among them the vital possibility of creating meanings and events that is considered later. But even an artist who gives all her available time to her practice shares with everyone else life's inescapable experiences, including childhood, maturity and, in time, old age.

However, if ageing is universal, it is experienced in a myriad ways. Individual lives unfold differently. Each is a unique story. People are shaped by events, those they create and those they experience, and among those events is their work. A life of farming is not like one of banking: the years spent in such dissimilar activities shapes each person accordingly. Malcolm Gladwell suggests that development of a high-level creative skill takes 10,000 hours of practice in youth. At the age of 70, a professional artist will have spent six, eight or ten times as long at her work. If it is true that professionalism in art is a matter of attitude, it is also marked by the craft knowledge gained by an investment of time.

So one difference between professional and amateur artists who reach retirement age is simply their degree of experience in arts practice. Of course, experience is not an unmixed blessing. Its most obvious disadvantage, common enough in the arts, is to mislead people into thinking they know the edges of the possible; in that belief, they stay within increasingly familiar territory. The Zen teacher, Shunryu Suzuki, speaks of the 'beginner's mind', which, knowing nothing, makes no assumptions about what is possible or how things should be. To discover art late, after retirement but with an open mind, can give rise to fresh approaches and ideas.

Such alterations do not gainsay Simone de Beauvoir's suggestion that a person's experience of old age is shaped by how they lived in what she called 'the prime of life'. They are made possible by what has preceded them. Terri Morrow's transformative encounter with theatre at the age of 67, which is described below, occurred *because* of her life up to that point, not despite it. This middle part of the book considers how commitment to an artistic practice, whether pursued throughout life or enabled by retirement itself, can give a different quality to a person's life in old age.

Retirement

Although many people long for retirement, especially if their jobs are hard or unpleasant, the idea still has negative connotations. Retirement changes every aspect of a person's life. It affects how they spend their time and how much money they can spend, who they see and how they are seen. Above all, perhaps, it implies they are no longer a player in the game. They have retired, hurt or not, and will now only watch from the stands. It's not surprising that many people, like Steve Franks, resist being seen as retired:

'I can't believe it myself, but next month I'm going to be 70. I don't look it, I don't feel it and I don't act it.'

Leaving work that provides interest and purpose can be a wrench. For Eric Foxley, retirement from university work was a jolt, even though he'd steadily reduced his working days over a five year period. Still, it was a while before he woke without expecting to go to the office. His wife Joy, a primary school teacher and folk dancer, missed the contact with children after she retired, as well as the cycle of community celebrations, such as Christmas, Diwali and Eid. They met as students in the 1950s, brought together by an enthusiasm for English folk music, and have worked semi-professionally as musicians, dancers and organisers ever since. Joy later discovered an interest in Indian classical dance and went twice to study in Gujarat. In retirement, they were able to extend their dance and music activity, performing, teaching and travelling to festivals. Contribute to a wide social and cultural network has shaped their retirement. Their musical gifts bring them pleasure, recognition and a sense of being valued and in demand.

The end of formal work can also be felt by professional artists who have been employed or freelance in the arts. When Steve Lobb left Greenwich Mural Workshop after more than 30 years, it took a while to get beyond having specific tasks to do and people to do them with—the world of deadlines and expectations. In returning to a form of painting that was entirely self-directed, he needed to establish a new routine and rituals to structure his time.

'To get up in the morning and have something to go to is a great thing.'

Freelance artists who teach, perform or run workshops sometimes avoid retirement as such by taking on less work once a pension provides some income. For others, such as painters making work mainly for sale through galleries or freelance musicians, retirement may simply be a choice, albeit one influenced by health and financial circumstance. Sylvia Hays, an American-born artist who has lived in Orkney for many years, felt lucky to be an artist:

'The downside is that it's a jumped up way of saying you're permanently unemployed, but the upside is there's no such thing as retirement. There's no transition to be made, no shock of being older than 60 or 68 or whatever it's going to be.'

She found reaching the official age of retirement liberating. For years she'd watched friends and neighbours go about their economically profitable work and wondered about the value of her own contribution. As they retired and she did not, she felt the need to explain her work, or even justify her life choices, slip away. She continued grappling with the intellectual and aesthetic challenges of her painting, while they took up the activities, and sometimes the attitudes, of the retired. But many people meet retirement with a determination to avoid just that trap:

'Now I'm retired, I'm not going to sit in the armchair and wait to die.'

Louise White

Retirement was the spur to taking up art practice for many members of the Malcolm X Centre theatre group in Bristol. They had watched family and friends reach that long-awaited moment of being able to stop after decades of hard manual work, and then seemingly to give up on life and become old in a matter of months.

'I've seen a lot of people—because they're not prepared for retirement, because they make work the only focus, they've lost it; they've really lost it.'

Gloria Watson

The women in the theatre group have a 'use it or lose it' attitude and were determined, when retirement came, to be as active as possible. Through acta, they learned about theatre and began creating their own productions to speak of their experiences of life in the

West Indies and Britain, migration, work and much more. Zest for life and now for an active retirement is both a reason for, and a statement of, their performances.

'In actual fact, you could encourage someone: seeing you, they say "She's retired and she's doing something. Well, I can do something as well, if she can do it..." So you can actually motivate someone.'

Gloria Watson

Many older people want to stay active and earning as long as they feel well. A simple retirement age served industrial societies but is out of step with how people now live. Many would prefer to taper the end of work over years, perhaps even decades. With less simplistic distinctions between paid and unpaid work, we might even learn to value properly the work of carers. Ballet dancers retire in their thirties; contemporary dancers sometimes work into their nineties, as Anna Halprin did. Between those extremes lie every imaginable permutation of work–life balance. Artists, who make a virtue of change and fluidity, have experience of handling retirement that society as a whole might learn from.

Prejudice

'I still worry about telling anyone my age, because it's an ageist society; if I tell someone my age, they see me as that number after that.'

Bisakha Sarker

Old people who are artists are as likely to experience prejudice about their age as old people who are not. Even the grand old men and women of the arts cannot avoid their age being made part of

their story. For everyone else, the story too often *begins* with age. It can be difficult to avoid it ending there.

There are professional prejudices that affect older artists who are not protected by renown and critical appreciation. The art world shares the general high valuation of youth. On one level, this is understandable, given the importance of novelty in consumer society. A young artist is a blank sheet onto which a range of more or less profitable narratives can be written and there is always the hope, however short-lived, of exceptional success and wealth. An artist with 30 or 40 years of work behind them looks like a known quantity, whose stock is unlikely to rise profitably.

'Emerging' artists are allowed space to make mistakes—and rightly so, since they are discovering their voice and vision. But the same tolerance is not always extended to artists who are familiar. For them an unsuccessful novel, a coldly received exhibition or an uncertain step into new territory is likely to be read as a falling off, the end of their interesting, creative youth. Like established performers they are easily typecast by commissioners and critics who believe they know what that artist does (or should do). Past success can become a trap that defines future opportunities.

Artists who can work alone, such as painters, writers and composers, may work until the end, if they have the desire and health, because they need no one else's help or permission. Those whose work is cooperative, including many in the performing arts, can find it harder to continue because doing so depends on others being willing to back and work with them. However, the late work of filmmakers like Alain Resnais (b. 1922) and Clint Eastwood (b. 1930), shows that artists with an established reputation and things to say can retain credibility to the end, even in Hollywood.

Women in the performing arts do face age discrimination. In 2009, the removal of Arlene Phillips (b. 1943) from the judging panel of the BBC's flagship entertainment, *Strictly Come Dancing*, attracted widespread criticism. But many female performers find their work drying up at a much younger age, partly because theatre,

film and television still have far more roles for men of all ages. Judi Dench (b. 1934) remains an exceptional instance of an actress in high demand late in her life.

Artists who teach or run workshops can also find demand for their skills drying up as they get older. There may be all sorts of reasons for this, some more justifiable than others. Age sometimes brings a loss of flexibility or a reluctance to learn from an artist young enough to be your grandchild, although their youth might actually be why they have new ideas and knowledge to share. It is also true that commissioners and programmers have their networks and contacts, in which their own generation naturally dominates.

There has been an important growth in arts programmes for older people in recent years, ranging from the outreach initiatives of museums, galleries and concert halls, to the provision of arts activities in day and residential services. The practice varies widely but some of the most interesting includes the creation of new work by older people through participatory workshops, performances and exhibitions. This work is often both original and moving, and deserves greater recognition in the arts world.

However, these opportunities present some ambiguities. Such art workshops and performances are typically planned and delivered by younger people, though some organisations have recently begun employing older artists as workshop leaders, so creating new professional opportunities and practice. It would be perverse, though, if older artists came to be seen as able to work only with their own age group. There is value in intergenerational contact, both for older participants in workshops and for younger artists themselves.

Even within intergenerational groups in the amateur or semi-professional fields, the prejudices that exist outside the rehearsal room can find their way inside it. Having discovered a passion for acting with one professional company, Terri Morrow went to some

rehearsals with a local mixed-age amateur theatre group. The experience was not a happy one:

'When we had to do a still frame, this young bright spark said to me: "You can be the door jamb". I thought, okay, are you trying to tell me my performance is wooden?'

All performers must come to terms with their embodied selves as they age in order to continue their work, but that is not the same as having to take on roles shaped only by other, younger, people's perception of you. Fortunately, whether they are professionals with a reputation or amateurs at an early stage of their creative paths, old artists have at least the possibility of using their art to counter prejudice they may encounter as they age. Indeed, the act of creating art can be in itself a form of resistance to the idea that with age comes passivity and resignation.

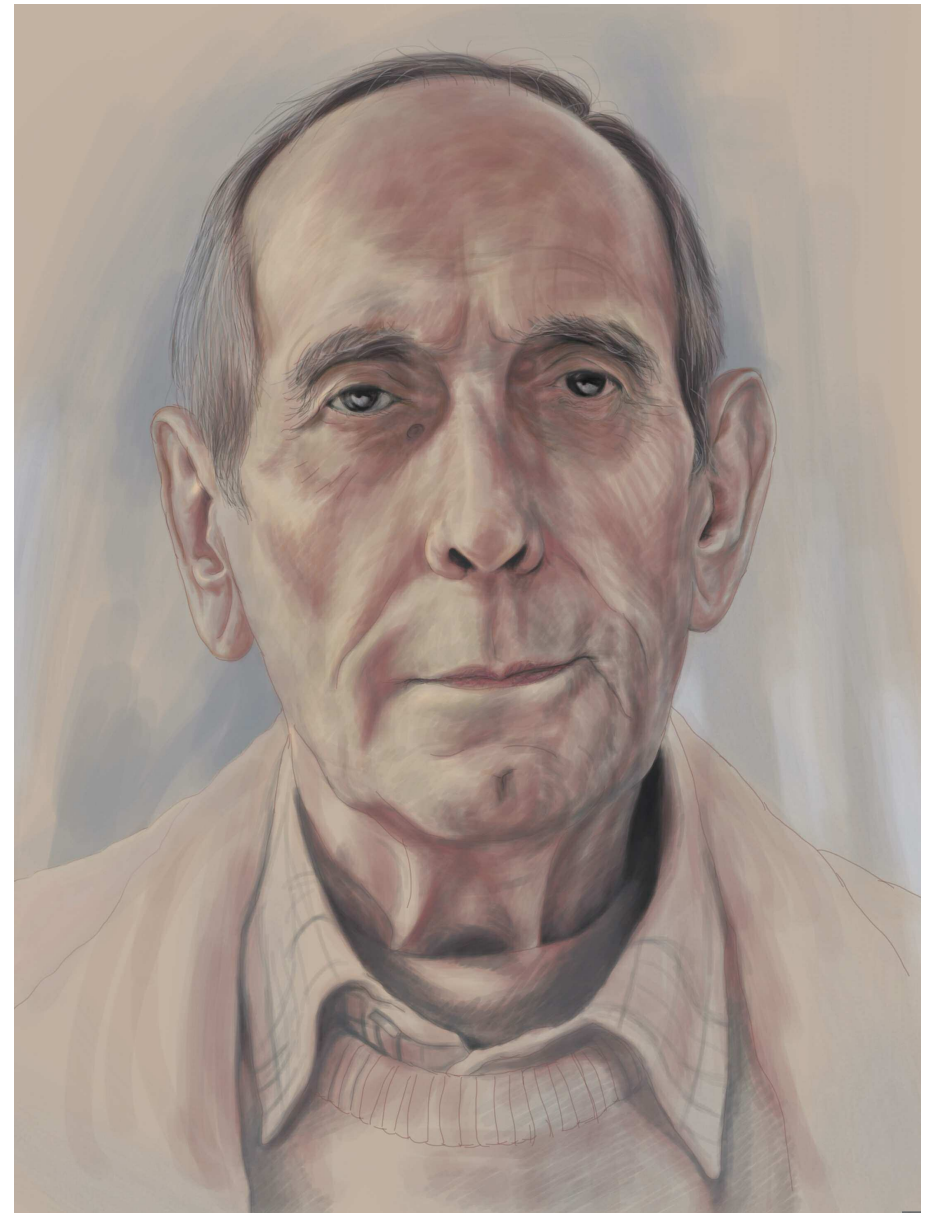
'I will not say my age: instead, I will dance for you, and I will try to dance as truthfully as I can, for you to guess and give me an age.'

Bisakha Sarker

Celebration

Some artists use their creativity directly as a way to challenge stereotypes of age and to celebrate its distinctive quality. Dance, particularly in contemporary and folk forms, has become very open to the ageing body in recent years, even celebrating its different quality of movement and expression. Merce Cunningham marked his 90th birthday with a new work at Brooklyn Academy of Music and remains an inspiration to many contemporary dancers. After his death in 2009, the Guardian's dance critic wrote:

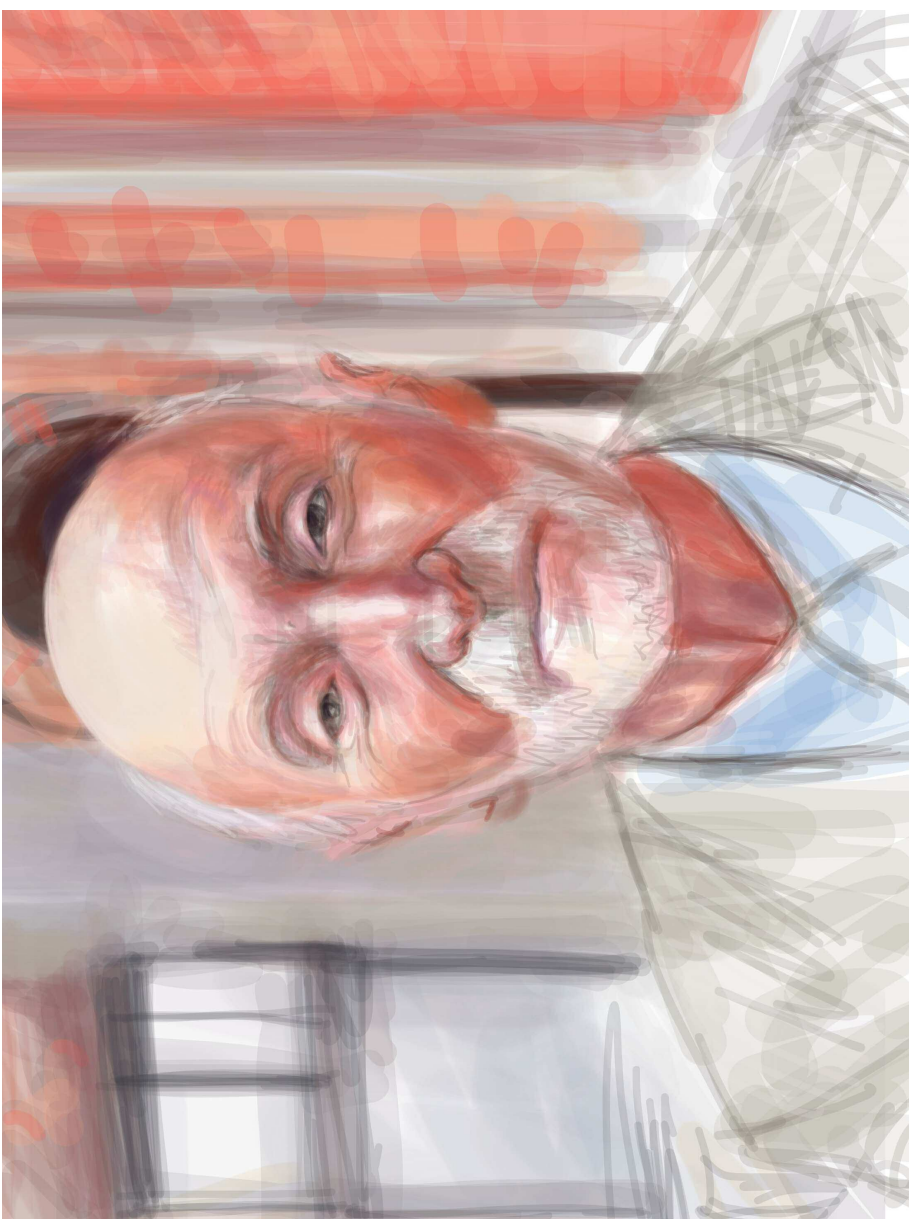




Jerry McDermott



Gwen Sewell
Rosie Wheatland



Colin McLean

Phyllis Seely MacFarland
Louise White
Gloria Watson
Madge Williams



Noreen Smart
Teresa McKeown
Andy Fee
Patricia Gormley
Maureen Ginley

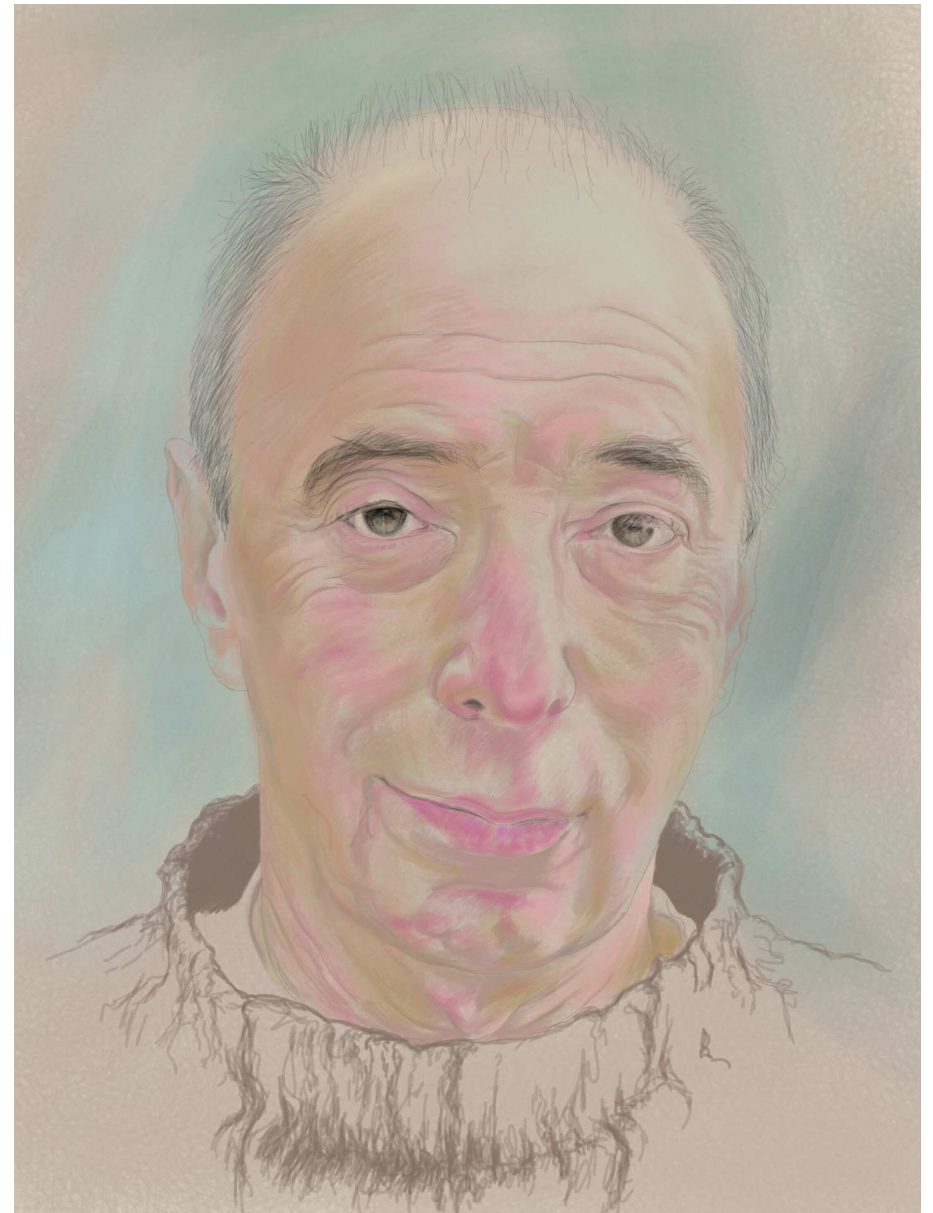




Sally Cottis



Norma McCullough
Celia McMenamin
Monica McBride
Caroline Freeburn



Steve Franks



Terri Morrow

Even in his 90s, when he was ravaged by arthritis, his dancing contained a burnished intelligence. And the choreography he created was just as compelling, just as rich.

Judith Mackrell, 2009

Seeing Cunningham was a highlight of Colin McLean's journey into dance. It had been a passion from earliest childhood but not one he had imagined might be his path in life. A performance by John Gilpin with the Festival Ballet was Colin's first glimpse that men could dance professionally and to the highest standards, but his own career began only when he retired, after careers in the army and the church. After first steps in local dance classes, he auditioned for the Laban Centre at the age of 69 and was accepted onto a course with students a fraction his age. It was an exhilarating and liberating experience as the joy he had always felt in physical movement was harnessed to knowledge, technique and training. He gained his diploma with distinction and has been working as a dancer ever since, performing in dance pieces, films and at one-off performances.

'I just grab everything I possibly can. I dance for anybody, go anywhere. I have the advantage of being retired and so I'm not totally dependent on dance income. It's absolutely wonderful.'

Colin's story is unusual because he trained late and because his grace and presence in performance have drawn choreographers to work with him. But dancers such as Fergus Early (b. 1946) and Liz Lerman (b. 1948), among many others, have pioneered an engagement in dance for older people that has become, in the best sense of the word, almost commonplace. Other forms of dance, from ballroom to folk, also attract and welcome older dancers. Joy and Eric Foxley are in their eighties but still very active in traditional dance, where age has a different relationship to the form's values.

The growth of Indian dance in the UK has made accessible another form that sees old age differently. Bisakha Sarker, who has been performing Indian creative dance as pioneered by Uday Shankar, since the age of five, initially sought to conceal the effect of age in her performance, before rethinking how to deal with it as part of who she is:

'I cannot hide and I don't need to, so I'm saying, take me as who I am. I'm not pretending to be able to do what I cannot do. You accept that you cannot do it, so you find another way.'

Bisakha Sarker

The narrative of her dance has evolved as she has worked through complex feelings about vanity, ageing and mortality. Her dance has opened up to other stories that draw on a lifetime's experience: she naturally sees things differently in her late sixties than in her early thirties. Happily, her artistry and technique are capacious enough to accommodate such explorations.

There is something very important in contemporary dance's openness to age. Dance exists in the body, where time inscribes itself also. A writer or a painter can expect their work to represent them; a musician like Kate Bush can stop performing in public so her persona ages slowly in her work. But the dancer is the dance. This is the great embodied art and its celebration can be a profound discovery even, or especially, when it comes late, as it did for Colin McLean:

'I was a bit stunned when my dance tutor wrote in my report, "He's a beautiful dancer to watch". I found that hard to take on board because no one had ever said that to me. The affirmation of my body—that's something enormous.'

The best make up, the most expensive surgery, can change our appearance but will not make us look young. So perhaps, precisely because they cannot avoid it, dancers have been courageous in the

face of ageing. Dancers know everything there is to know about losing suppleness and strength, about quick injuries and slower recoveries, about stiffening joints, arthritis and disability: no one is more in touch with her body than a dancer. But they also know about how new feelings and expressions become possible if you slow down, if you are avoiding or failing to avoid pain, if you listen, sense and appreciate. Perhaps artists in other disciplines, and people with no artistic ambitions too, could learn something important from the dancers.

Discovery

The best part of my old age, has been, and still is, a little less ordinary. It is entirely to do with having had the luck to discover that I can write.

Diana Athill, 2008

Colin McLean's experience is unique, as the narrative arc of each life is unique. But in other ways it is not uncommon. For many of those I met who were not already working as artists, retirement was the beginning of a new life, even a transformation, as they became seriously involved in art for the first time. For some, like Colin, this was the fulfilment of a lifetime desire; for others, it was an almost accidental encounter, but one which enabled, and was enabled by, the wider change into a life after work.

A lost generation

'You hear people saying: "I could have been a singer but my mother couldn't afford the lessons", or "I always wanted to learn the piano" or "I wanted to learn to dance". I could have said, "I always wanted to act, but I never had the chance."

Terri Morrow

The generation born before the end of the Second World War is now past the age of retirement. They grew up in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, before the baby boomers changed everything, when choices were limited and young people were expected to contribute to family and country, not pursue their own desires. To imagine being a painter, an actor or a singer was, for most people, as fanciful as dreaming of marrying into the aristocracy: possible, in theory, but no one knew anyone who had actually done it. That door was closed, irrespective of class or background.

Growing up in post-war Belfast, Teresa McKeown, Noreen Smart and Andy Fee, who are all now active performers with Spring Chickens, had no choice but to leave school at the first opportunity; the family income depended on it.

'I always loved music. My granny had about five sisters and they all could play an instrument. I was always put on a stool and made to sing, but I gave it up, gave it up.'

Teresa McKeown

'In those days, during the war years, there wasn't any artists about; we didn't have art classes as such at school.'

Jerry McDermott

In his Scottish army family, Colin McLean was never in any doubt about his future in the Argylls. In Kolkata, Bisakha Sarker worked hard at her dance, but her studies came first and she graduated as an anthropologist. It was only the particular circumstances of moving to Britain that allowed her to become a professional dancer. For most of this generation, dreams of art college or drama school were just that—dreams.

Today, these people and many others have been able to fulfil in retirement the hopes of their youth. They have taken to theatre or dance or painting with a commitment born of old hunger. It is very moving to see lives finally able to be what they can be. There are

drawbacks to beginning so late, of course. There is so much to learn and perhaps one can never inhabit one's art in the same way as someone whose life has been shaped by its practice. But there are compensations, akin to the freedom Sally Cottis speaks of, as Colin McLean also observed:

'If I'd got into dance at that age it would have had to be my career and my salary, but when growing into it at 65, and even more so after retiring from active priesthood, it wasn't my bread and butter. I didn't have a family to maintain, so that meant it could be just art. One could just do one's art and not worry about anything else.'

Accidental discoveries

Other people have come to art almost accidentally, encouraged by friends, or following a path almost unconsciously. Rosie Wheatland, who has lived all her life in South East London, cared for her husband for many years. His death left an enormous gap in her life. Fortunately, friends rallied round and drew her into clubs and social activities: it was the people she met at Entelechy Arts in Deptford who got her enthused about theatre. Now, she says:

'I never have a minute to myself, apart from Sunday, and I hate Sundays.'

Her friend and co-performer, Gwen Sewell, agrees, though her day for sleeping late is Saturday because she goes to church on Sundays. She had never performed before she was introduced to the Entelechy workshop, and first impressions were a little intimidating:

'When I come it was like a madhouse. Oh dear—everyone was talking, there was no head and no tail of it. But now it's very nice: everybody has their cue. Everybody is equal in the group.'

That's the thing about it—if there's anything on, everybody takes a part in in, no matter how small.'

Steve Franks is another person who discovered an interest in art after retirement. Although he paints, it is community theatre that takes up more of his time. Having first become involved with acting in Bristol, in a group for older people, he gravitated towards the community company where he was working with people of all ages, with varied interests and backgrounds.

'I always wanted to act, but I was very inhibited. It's only since making small steps here that I've developed and done things, mainly impromptu stuff. I feel much more confident, and I enjoy it, whereas before being on stage filled me with terror.'

The discovery of theatre has brought him pleasure and interest as he has taken on increasingly ambitious roles in the company.

Transformation

Sometimes, finding an artistic voice late in life can be transformational. Terri Morrow and her husband returned to their native Cardiff following his retirement, settling in sheltered accommodation that suited their present needs. It was a difficult transition for Terri, who had been very shy since childhood and suffered acute agoraphobia.

An invitation from Age Concern to contribute to a project about childhood memories intrigued her and she found the courage to attend the first meeting with Re:Live Theatre. Her anxieties had not included stage fright because she had no idea she would be telling her stories herself. But six weeks later, after a sleepless night, she was on stage:

'I went out and I sat there and—oh, the safety in the darkness of the cinema. It was wonderful. Suddenly I was given

permission to be dramatic; it was okay to show your feelings. I was given the luxury of being able to stand there and let it out—it was fabulous.'

That night was the beginning of a journey of change that has transformed not just Terri's life, but those of her family and friends. She has gone on to co-write and perform in another play with Re:Live and worked with professional actors. There were performances throughout Wales and in Ireland, for which Terri got into a plane for the first time in over 30 years. Since then, she has written children's stories and published them on her own website. She is building on her craft, learning to bring greater subtlety to her performance. The change has been profound, allowing her not only to rethink her past and what it means to her but also to stand her ground and say what she feels.

'There's one line: "Throwing away the unhappy memories because they no longer serve their purpose, the happier ones have crowded them out". They're not just empty words that I'm saying, when I stand up. That's true, that really is true. I carried all that baggage for years and suddenly through the drama it's now my best friend. It's not baggage: it's a tool, a very powerful tool.'

Fulfilment

Being valued

Rita Roberts, who is in her late sixties, is now severely disabled. But in retirement, and despite her health problems, she has developed a practice as a painter, fulfilling a desire nurtured since childhood. As a working class girl in the industrial midlands, she was told that museums were for 'posh' people. She also thought that people were old in their forties, and it is true that neither working nor living

conditions were conducive to long life. It was a museum painting group that opened the door for her. The weekly classes at Wednesbury Museum and Art Gallery have become central in her life, both for the development of her skills and friendship.

'They are golden to me: if they go on holiday or to a museum, they bring information back and talk about it. I'm a human being with them, I'm not a person in a wheelchair.'

Rita is inspired both by the natural world and by the work of other artists; she is especially drawn to the art of Aboriginal Australia. But her own painting is rooted in the Black Country she knows so well, and especially the churches that still stand among the often decayed traces of former industrial strength, and were important in her childhood. Working now from photographs, she tries to catch not just the appearance of the buildings, but something of their meaning to the communities they have served. In that she has certainly been successful. Her paintings are reproduced as greeting cards and sold for various good causes.

Rita Roberts is a modest person who hopes only that her paintings give pleasure. But through them, she is recognised among family, friends and a wider community as a talented person, someone with a vision of life and gifts to offer. Her disabilities make her dependent on others in many ways. Her abilities enable her to do something that is cherished and valued.

'I'm needed somewhere; I'm needed for something. Without this I'd have nothing.'

At night, or in the early morning, if she is unable to sleep, Rita watches the light in her room and thinks about the painting she's working on, and the world she tries to represent. She feels, in her own words, very lucky.

Being recognised

The sense of fulfilment felt by Rita Roberts was shared, in their own ways, by many of the older people who had come to art late in life, perhaps partly because the opportunity to be creative had been so long delayed. Now, being able to express their ideas and be heard, or even just to enjoy artistic experiment for its own sake, was very sweet, especially where it was unexpected.

Terri Morrow feels that her performance and writing have enabled her, finally, to be herself:

'When people say 'You've changed', I get a little bit angry because, no, this is me. I never got a chance to show the real me.'

Crucially, for someone whose life was blighted by crippling shyness, theatre has given Terri a *public* platform. An audience's recognition of her experience, and of her gifts for turning it into captivating performance, has allowed her to take her legitimate place in society: to be herself.

Similarly, the women who have formed the Malcolm X Theatre Group are now recognised as actors within the local community, though they have a down to earth view of their accomplishments. They are used to being stopped in the street or in local shops by people who want to talk about last night's show or simply say that they appreciate their example. They are seen, and they see themselves, not as retired people but as performers, people with stories to tell: agents of change.

The stories they want to tell are based in their own experience. Sometimes they look back at life in the Caribbean or working in the factories, shops and hospitals of Britain. But the women are also keen to get across their ideas about life today, and to help others both through their example and by dramatizing everyday situations. Their play about how to deal with uninvited callers was a high point for Louise White:

'Showing the older people, or the people that live alone, what not to do and how to do it. I think that was one of my best moments.'

Having something to give, to share, to say and having those gifts accepted, welcomed and heard: these are essential aspects of being human. We give and we receive. We are grateful and appreciated. At times or in certain circumstances, we may need more, perhaps a great deal more. We may eventually need others to do almost everything for us. Being able to give something in return, even something as apparently useless but also personal as a painting, a story or a song, helps keep us agents in the world.

Being successful

'You learn to rely on yourself and you trust in that. I'm not dependent on any kind of recognition. I'm not interested in money. I don't need to con myself.'

Lene West

By the time they reach retirement age, most professional artists have shown, performed or published enough to know how the world sees them. They may not agree with that assessment, but the idea of being an undiscovered genius is hard to sustain much beyond middle age. It was not unusual for someone to say, for example, *'my craftsmanship is impeccable'*, in describing their work. It was a measured, informed assessment of the person's work, without arrogance. It is the kind of self-awareness that does not come to everyone, even in old age.

In retirement, the professional artists expressed a common detachment from markets. Rosie Martin, whose work does sell well, was conscious of *not* making work with that aim in mind.

'I do find more and more, the older I get, that art is personal and the more you can do with it the better it gets and the further you can take it—and I don't think you can take it that far if you're aiming at a market.'

Lene West, like other visual artists, was primarily concerned with the challenges of her work:

'I do it because I enjoy doing it. I like tackling and solving the problem that presents itself in whatever I'm doing. Success for me has got something to do with actually doing it, rather than the money I could make out of it.'

While these artists appreciate the recognition of peers and purchasers, it is irrelevant to whether they continue to work or what they do. The fulfilment of success lies in the creation of work.

Memory

The Malcolm X ladies often draw on past experience in developing their work, something they have in common with several other artists whose practice postdates their retirement. This is natural enough, since anyone who has reached their sixties has a lot of memories. It is also in the nature of the third age to be in dialogue with all that has gone before, just as youth looks forward in expectation to what may come.

Dealing with the past is a responsibility of old age and it is not surprising that people use the practice of art to do it. It is, after all, one way of sorting through and reflecting on one's experience, of trying to make sense of it and of sharing and testing the results with others. Exploring memory in art produces results as diverse as any other subject, from intimate moments of personal history or shared reminiscence to political commentary on changing values. All of

these and more are evident in the theatre work of acta, Entelechy Arts or the Spring Chickens.

This concern with the past was less obvious among the professional artists I met, though it is common enough in the history of art. But less obvious does not mean it is not there: simply that the knowledge and expertise acquired during a lifetime's work is likely to produce more complex and subtle outcomes.

It is also possible that those who have practiced art for decades might have become less concerned with themselves in that practice. The conductor, Sir Colin Davis (b.1927) describes himself in his eighties as being in the service of others:

'One's ego becomes less and less interesting as you get older, to oneself and to everyone else. I have been around it too long. The less ego you have, the more influence you have as a conductor: And the result is that you can concentrate on the only things that really matter: the music and the people who are playing it. You are of no account whatever. But if you can help people to feel free to play as well as they can, that's as good as it gets.'

Colin Davis, 2011

Artists who begin their practice only after retirement are, despite their age, young in relation to art. It is natural that their journey should be of discovery and self-discovery, the more so when they are also going through the personal adjustment of ageing.

Solidarity

The practice of art can be a very social activity. This will be self-evident in the case of performers, whose work is often collective. The sense of togetherness has been valued by many of the older people who have taken part in Big Telly's ambitious Spring Chickens programme. Few had done much theatre before, but the op-

portunity to work with friends and people with whom they share common ground was irresistible. The work was not just an affirmation of themselves as older performers, but of the culture and community that made them. As Teresa McKeown put it:

'There's a sense of acceptance about it all—like the very first performance we did in Conway Mill, when everybody all stood up cheering at the end. When the curtain went across we were all hugging each other, and I said to Maureen, how did that happen?'

The solidarity of the group is also valued by participants in community theatre groups run by acta in Bristol. Their friendly, inclusive atmosphere can be helpful. Steve Franks felt encouraged to persevere although, when we met, he was not finding the sessions easy.

'At the moment I'm struggling with the drama here. I'm not feeling very creative, but I'm coming and hopefully that will diminish and I'll get back into it.'

For a professional musician like Ian Gammie, reaching retirement age was not a significant milestone. He still performs with a range of classical ensembles and informal groups, much as he has done throughout his life. The calendar of rehearsals, concerts and recording sessions remains filled and the social contacts they both depend on and nourish are a key part of life in the third age.

Artists associations, formal and informal, bring together some of those who work alone. The painters Sally Cotter, Rosie Martin and Margaret Duncan are all members of different groups through which they meet peers, share resources and organise exhibitions. Margaret enjoys meeting visitors while stewarding for the Society of Staffordshire Artists.

'There has to be an artist to sit there and talk to anybody that comes in. I've had lots of people saying to me 'Oh, how do you do this?'. It's very nice talking about art, very nice indeed.'

Lene West now lives in London after many years of painting and teaching in the Middle East. The limited space at home first drew her to the classes offered by Cubitt Artists in Islington, and access to studio space remains one reason for seeking out such opportunities. But the contact with other like-minded people, professionals and amateur, makes the days she spends there particularly enjoyable.

Incapacity

Health and stamina are easily taken for granted by those who have them. They are not by those who are or fear losing them. Age brings reduced strength, inevitably, though it may be more or less marked in different people. There are the little injuries that one recovers from less well with the passage of time, as Sylvia Hays observed:

'I fell flat on my face and bashed a lot of things, which repaired themselves pretty quickly—except for my knee, which persists; arthritis has set into it now, so sometimes I have trouble standing and walking. It varies from one day to the next.'

Those who have seen parents and older friends on this road know what may lie ahead. Whether that knowledge is a source of courage or anxiety, the prospect of no longer being able to do what one loves is not easy to live with.

'There's the physical challenge of being able to do the work I want to do. I still have the drive to do it, but am I physically able, have I got the stamina and the strength to do it?'

Some people's creativity is adaptable and finds new outlets. Sylvia has begun writing in her seventies, and now feels it pulling as hard as painting:

'That's the great thing—I think if I'm too cronky to stand up in front of a canvas, I can sit down and write.'

Joy and Eric Foxley, for whom folk dancing has been at the heart of social life since teenage years, are also conscious of changing physical capacities. Dancing has helped them stay fit and well into their eighties, but that may not always last. As Eric said:

'It wouldn't take much to make me decrepit; you've only got to tweak a knee and you realise you're vulnerable.'

Fortunately, his gifts as an accordionist and Joy's as a caller, mean that they will be able to take part in much loved ceilidhs, even when they are no longer on the floor with everyone else.

Bisakha Sarker feels that the evolution of her performance with age is also teaching her how to work with older people in her dance workshops.

'Because I cannot move in the same way as I could at one time, I understand a bit about their energy level, and I can find interesting, varied ideas, within that range of energy and time.'

She understands the constraints felt by the older body and so her instructions take account of that, helping to avoid asking participants to make movements that may lead to frustration or even injury.

Bereavement

With age comes an increasing likelihood of losing people who are close to us: parents, inevitably, but also siblings, partners, friends, even children. The ending of relationships that have endured for decades or even lifetimes is one of the obvious and terrible losses of old age. Conversations cease; feelings do not. Time is emptied and must be filled. Rosie Wheatland spoke powerfully of the emptiness she felt after her husband's death:

'Suddenly there was nothing and I just did not know what to do with myself. When you're living alone, you need something; you just can't sit and watch the television all the time. You need to get out and do things, else you just become a nothing, don't you?'

The friendships Rosie made through Entelechy Arts were important in rebuilding her life, but discovering theatre brought more than a social life. Developing and rehearsing ideas for plays, beginning to write poetry and performing in Entelechy's regular cabaret events, opened up completely new interests and ways of being.

The cliché that art can be 'therapeutic' is problematic. It is in the nature of clichés to be built around a kernel of truth: they would not otherwise achieve such currency. But that core is wrapped around with so many received ideas and simplifications that it becomes coarse and may even be obscured. Human beings can derive profound relief from pain and distress as a result of creating art or recreating it as a listener, viewer or reader. But, as has been discussed already, it is misleading to see art as medicine that makes things better. Given an appropriate drug, someone who is ill will usually get better, but they have no control over their body's response to the drug. Art can also make a person feel better, even though it cannot, as a drug can, remove the source of their pain.

But its effects depend on active intellectual and emotional work. It offers the possibility of imaginative journeys through which we may be able to see our pain and distress differently and perhaps form a relationship with it that enables us to cope better with it.

Rosie Martin was in her late fifties when her younger daughter died, on the threshold of that middle part of life when the promises of youth are supposed to be fulfilled. There is nothing to be said here about such an experience, but it is worth trying to understand how her artistic practice, developed over a lifetime, provided a resource for the journey.

In her grief, Rosie wanted to be somewhere different, somewhere that had no people, no associations, no traces. She found herself powerfully drawn to the white emptiness of Poles, travelling initially to the more accessible north.

'I first went to the Arctic and I noticed that expansiveness of light, which is all colours, and the expansiveness of the distance, because there were great distances but there was nothing in them. I wanted to be there and I wanted to show it in painting.'

Then she went south. Taking a position as an art teacher on a cruise ship, she was able to make three long journeys to the southern oceans and the Antarctic continent.

'The Antarctic has got areas that blend together. The sky blends into the terrain, into the sea, into the ice. It's a land which is just a space. And that's something that I find really fascinating now. I've always liked the idea of distilling the vast into the very small. That's my thing, really, making that connection between something which is monumental but condensing it so that it can be viewed by me, and by other people as well; if they want.'

She made special books of watercolour paper, long and wide, on which she caught the extraordinary Antarctic landscape in a series of watercolours. She has never exhibited the work, which is exceptional by any standard, though she hasn't ruled out the possibility. But the important thing has been the journey that her art allowed her to take through her experience and her loss. Nothing is changed by it; but everything is different.

'When I went to the Antarctic, obviously it was a spiritual journey, though I don't believe in anything...apart from the art, really. I think it can heal all. It goes a long way to healing all, anyway.'

End:

Making sense of stories



4 A mature creativity

Now autumn strews its leaves across my doorway:
How richly, from a meld of pain and splendour,
You mask for you and us, careworn companion,
The greyness of our common end in colour:

Franz Hessel

The third stage of life is different and it naturally leads artists to create differently. The art they make today is not what they once made, though it may be in dialogue with what they made before. Indeed, that inescapable conversation with the past is part of what makes art in late life distinctive. Coming after the beginning and the middle, the end is shaped by and in reaction to what has already been.

That difference is sometimes venerated by cultures with a high regard for the old. In Japan, for example, state funds are set aside for 'Living National Treasures,' people who have achieved outstanding mastery in an aspect of the country's heritage. European cultures have their own reasons for admiring the work of older artists, though they do not usually offer such direct support.

At the same time, it is possible to idealise old age, just as it is easy to romanticise youth. Humans often see life as a journey towards a destination that makes sense of it all, not just an end. It is satisfying to read the story of an artist's development towards an inspiring and instructive conclusion. Artistic lives that flower early but lead to years of creative drift, repetition or negation are much harder to accommodate, though they are common enough.

So we should be wary of sentimentalising older artists and reading into their late work qualities we like to associate with old age, such as wisdom or spiritual reconciliation. How much is our interpretation shaped by knowledge of something's lateness? Age is a matter of numbers; maturity one of character. For every Prospero there is a King Lear.

Late Style

'A lot of artists get very active as they get older, don't they? I certainly don't want to slow down. I don't stop working. I'd say, "Look we're on a roll, and if we're on a roll, just keep it going, because they will stop, eventually, but we don't know when; let's keep it going as much as we can". And I intend to. Yeah, I feel very, very active. I even think we're a bit ahead—I mean there's not many people exploring these areas.'

David Hockney, 2012

Still, the idea of Late Style remains compelling. The image of the mature artist, either transcendently reconciled with a life's work and mortality itself, or in final rebellion against past and future at once, is familiar to art history. Many artists have lived long lives and some of them have done their finest work in the last decade or two. Art is rich in authoritative statements that bear witness, among other things, to the will and vitality of great artists who, like Hockney, intend to keep going.

Late style tells a braver, more encouraging story of ageing than the time bomb or the gulag. Its characters are empowered, engaged in life and struggling with questions that make us human. But it is a high-minded story too, of tragic heroes engaged in the final struggle for meaning. They can inspire awe or even catharsis, as tragedy is meant to do, but their journey can seem very far from our own everyday tramp.

There are other paths traced by artists through the mountains of old age, including those explored in the middle section of this book. One response to old age is to shed the load of self-importance art can inspire in its creators. Certainly, there was little trace of it among the older professional artists I met.

'All those things that sometimes seemed a struggle to learn and absorb are now clear, second nature. You know how to stretch a canvas, take a photograph, apply plaster or watercolour or be nice to whoever you hope will give you an exhibition, and perhaps you might start to think about why you are doing what you are doing.'

Tess Jaray, 2011

The beginning artist has everything to learn: the grammar of the form, the rules that have shaped it in the past and the ways in which predecessors have conformed, stretched or broken them. There are centuries of tradition to explore, mentors to discover, love and outgrow, positions to take and ideas to die for, at least critically. But, as the painter Tess Jaray says, there is a point when the artist's craft is so known, so embodied, that the creative mind can range free. With the passing of hundreds, then thousands and then tens of thousands of hours in the studio, at a desk, or on stage, an artist finds her own place within her field. The thrill of discovery, that beginner's mind, is gone, but in its place may be knowledge and technique so profound that the artist can focus on what she is trying to say.

Knowing one's craft should come with time, repetition, experiment and reflection. A diligent and honest artist cannot help achieving a degree of mastery over the decades that a beginner, however gifted, cannot have. But knowing oneself, despite the association between wisdom and age, is a much less reliable achievement of the passing years. Western culture places great faith in the artist's exceptional perception and the intentionality of their work,

but in reality the distance between the personality and the work can be uncomfortably evident.

If wisdom is not an inevitable acquisition of age, older artists can achieve a certain realism about the nature and value of their practice. The responses of others, including peers and critics, are unlikely to be so wrong for so long. If the breakthrough has not come in the past 40 years, one has at least had time to come to terms with knowing where one stands. For some artists, accepting one's true capacities and preoccupations can be liberating as the demands of the market, commissioning bodies and critical opinion fall away.

Another late style

While most of us accept that wisdom is a special provenance of aging, many people have the reverse view of creativity: they believe it is a flower of youth that blooms less and less frequently as the decades pass.

Gene Cohen, 2005

Artists who come to art late in life are different, partly because they cannot have the mastery of craft of those who have already spent 40 or 50 years in their practice. But it is also important that they tend not to see themselves as part of an art world. They are not concerned with the opinion of critics (who are equally uninterested in amateurs). Nor do they generally compare themselves to professional peers, however much they admire them. Instead, their audience is principally family, friends and the communities to which they relate.

But there may be a knowledge and acceptance of self in relation to that audience similar to that which professionals have in the face of the art world. Four women from West Belfast who have begun performing with Spring Chickens since retirement, joked confidently about their sense of freedom from other people's judgement.

'Once I turned 50, I didn't care what anybody thought of me. Take me as I am. I might put my foot in it now and then, say the wrong thing or curse, but that's me. I'm certainly not going to change now, so why worry about what people think?'

'There's no nerves or anything going on stage, because people will laugh. And if they don't want to laugh, okay, I'll not come back—why worry?'

'You don't really have the self-consciousness as you get older; I think you're more comfortable in your own skin.'

'When we were young, we were worrying about our weight and our figures and all that carry on. Now, here's me, like it or lump it.'

In some cases, acceptance of self was associated with a sense that time was no longer unlimited so it was no longer possible to put off making some changes or facing certain truths. Recovering the freedom from family responsibilities that had constrained so many of the women artists in particular was also an important factor. Time was short but with fewer responsibilities, this could seem like the right moment to take on change.

'Because the children were grown up, I could be selfish. There was no-one else to consider. And perhaps there's trying for your finals, isn't there? I'm not going to get a chance like this again. Yes, this is meant to be—not just for me, for the others, for lots of people like me. And it's fantastic that we are being given this chance. At least I can go to my grave now without saying "I wonder, could I have stood on a stage?''

Terri Morrow

On the other hand, that freedom from family obligations, from the need to earn money through art and even from external expectations could be experienced as having all the time in the world to explore one's work.

'I can take as long as I like over it. Time is the other big thing: the feeling of pressure, the feeling you've got to finish it, it's got to be successful each time—I don't feel that now. I feel I've got time to fail, and it's great.'

Sally Cottis

5 Art and agency

The artist's act

'That's why creativity's been so important to me: a greater sense of self esteem. I'm doing all right, I feel good about myself and that's tremendous. I can be much more myself.'

Steve Franks

A lifetime's practice of art can give artists unusual resources in old age. Their creativity brings a capacity for action in the world, while their gifts are likely to be admired at a time of life when people are often overlooked or undervalued. But does it matter to anybody but them if some established artists experience a better old age as a result of their profession? It might, if the reason art can bring a quality to old age lies in practice, rather than excellence or even fame—if, in short, it is *acting as an artist* that can enhance the experience of ageing and life's last years. But what does it mean to act as an artist?

We have many verbs for the craft actions performed by artists: drawing, writing, playing, acting, dancing, painting, singing etc. What underlies all those actions is creation. The artist's act is to create. Unfortunately, the idea of creativity has become so prized in recent years that it has been applied as an adjective to almost any conceivable human activity, even creative ageing. It has thus become primarily a quality of things or people, as if it were embedded into their essence rather than achieved through action.

We speak of *'being an artist'* as we do of being a woman or being old. In doing so we make it an existential condition—something that cannot be changed, that is inseparable from a person's identity.

But people become artists through their acts, not biology, education or divine will. The claim to be an artist can only be justified by what a person does. At 18, Rimbaud was a poet; at 35 he was a merchant and a former poet who had written no literature for years.

Creation is what an artist does when she is drawing, writing, playing, acting, dancing, painting or singing. Creation is bringing something into existence: an image, a piece of music, a text, a performance, a film—anything that did not exist before it was imagined and made by the artist. The result may be extraordinary or dull, original or derivative, lasting or transitory. Excellence is not intrinsic in the artist's act, however desirable it may be: creation is.

As we can (almost) all speak, so can we all create. The quality of either act is distinct from its performance: some speakers are hesitant and inarticulate while others are gifted orators. Talent, training, effort, commitment, will and luck all play their part in an individual artist's achievement. Any one of them may be sufficient to create a single great work of art. Anyone can have the luck to take a great photograph; only a great photographer can take the hundreds that comprise a distinctive body of work, a creative personality.

Between those edges there is plenty of room for different people to act as artists, creating work with varying degrees of ambition, resonance and success: people who are known in their families only as a storyteller, or who are admired locally as a musician, or who are recognised by their peers as a fine artist.

Those ways of acting as an artist have always existed. Most arts practice has always happened far from the attention of those who write art history. But art has also undergone a profound transformation in recent decades. New creation and distribution technologies, combined with more education, leisure and democracy, have opened it up to millions who were previously only the silent audience at someone else's performance. People whose grandparents' closest contact with artists had been to wait upon them at table have become actors, writers, musicians, painters—in short, artists able to create their own work and find their own audiences.

The generation that lived through and contributed to the social and cultural changes of the post war period in their sixties and seventies. Many of them are only now, after lives of hard work and still limited opportunity, in a position to benefit from the new creative freedoms that exist. Some of that generation are happily seizing the opportunity to act as artists, determined both to enjoy it to the full and to use it to express some of what has been on their minds for so long. In doing so, through creation, they are exercising agency.

Agency

Agency is our capacity to act, to cause things to happen in the world according to our will. Agency is always limited, by natural laws (which prevent us from flying like Superman); by cultural norms (which make it unacceptable to shop naked); by social structures (which force us to stop working at 65); by other agents (who refuse to return our love) and by our own personalities (which struggle to accept that refusal).

Even with all these limitations, human beings crave agency because, without it, they are not fulfilled. Freedom of thought, will and action is inherent to human selfhood. That freedom is what makes slavery or living under dictatorship so intolerable that people risk death for it. Understanding how to gain and keep that freedom—which also means understanding and accepting its many real limits—is the task of a lifetime.

Coming of age is so important in all societies because it is with adulthood that we gain the right to exercise, and responsibility for, our own agency. From here on in, our achievements and our mistakes, and all they bring, are ours alone. Retirement is the symbolic end of that period of adulthood. Reaching 65 is the mirror image of turning 21, when the key of the door is exchanged for a carriage clock. The losses that come with age matter to us when they begin

to restrict our agency. Like the freedom acquired in the transition to adulthood it happens in stages. But it happens.

The practice of art, to whatever degree of skill or ambition, is one form of resistance to that change because, whatever else it might do to bring pleasure, enrich social life or earn money, it confers agency. Through creation, we can act in the world. And there is no age limit on art practice.

In her late sixties, Terri Morrow began learning to perform on a public stage and to tell the stories that have been on her mind for so many years. It took great courage, but the appreciation of audiences and fellow artists has been for her art, not for her personal journey. And it is being valued as an artist, with interesting things to say and an engaging ability to say them, that has brought Terri a sense of empowerment.

'It's had a knock-on effect. It's certainly made my husband look at me in a different light. I'm more articulate when I go to the doctor's. I'm able to say "No, I'm sorry, I feel like this and I want something doing". I'm able to communicate. I'm not so narrow-minded. I could go on and on. It's a tremendous journey I've been on.'

Terri's experience, while unique to her, is echoed by so many others. Members of the Belfast Spring Chickens have used theatre to open dialogue with young people and challenge ignorance and fear of old age. Patricia Gormley has gone on to create her own one-woman show, in which she plays four different women to get across her ideas. Now, she has been invited to Cyprus to speak at a conference:

'It is a five day training course on teaching older people. I am talking about how our drama group evolved and how the tenants here became interested in performing and the positive effects it has had. They are paying for me to come—I can't believe it. Happy days!'

6 Telling old age

'I'm a creative, vulnerable human being. I quite like the idea of accepting my vulnerability.'

Steve Franks

This book is one story of old age. It takes its place in a long tradition of European storytelling, whose recognised springs lie in Hebrew scripture and Classical literature, to look no further. That broad river has opened out into a sea of stories as humanity and its knowledge have increased, but also as the prospect of old age has changed in nature, likelihood and, perhaps above all, meaning.

There are many stories of old age and many ways of telling them. Science offers medical research and gerontology, population studies and epidemiology. Sociology uses quantitative and qualitative methods to describe ageing in social structures, while philosophy shapes defining questions about its possible meaning. Art proposes memoirs and self portraits, novels, films and cantata.

But in the end, all these stories depend on individual experiences, the fabric of actual lives. Old age is *lived*, like every other stage of life, by those fortunate enough to get there. If it is not seen as an unmixed blessing, like youth, that is because old age does bring significant losses, up to and including the loss of life itself. To pretend otherwise, to ourselves or to others, is foolish. It is also pointless, since the losses of old age—of health, friends, work and independence—cannot be avoided by ignoring them or even by force of will.

We can take such steps to stay well as are now recommended: exercising and eating well, being active and saving for a pension. But none guarantees a long, healthy or happy old age. What re-

mains, as ever, as in those ancient stories, is how we meet life—how we *experience* old age. And in that perhaps the practice of art, of whatever kind and with whatever degree of talent, has something specially valuable to offer.

Certainly, it can bring pleasure and occupation, which may be very valuable to those who are much alone. It can create social bonds and engagement in the world. It can keep body and mind active and so promote health. It can bring recognition of a person's gifts and maintain personal confidence. The practice of art can do all these and other desirable things, but it is not alone in that: golf, religion and grandchildren can all bring similar social and health benefits, lifting the spirits and giving delight.

Art does have a further capacity that is quite particular to itself. It allows the artist, professional or amateur, committed or impulsive, to act in the world. By creating something that did not exist she makes an event that changes reality, however slightly, and gains agency in her own existence. She expresses something of the unique nature of that existence and in doing so becomes a subject, not only an object.

The artist's act confers power and for that reason it can be described as having potential. An image, a sound, a performance, a story—each is charged with the power to affect those who experience it. Anyone who doubts the explosive force that art can have need only think of the opening ceremony of the London 2012 Olympic Games, which changed, through words, music, dance, oration and spectacle, how numberless people, in Britain especially, felt and thought about themselves. This is the agency of art: the creation of an event in time and space that has the capacity, like a well-aimed snooker shot, to change the pattern of everything around. But even the greatest players cannot foresee or guarantee a shot's every result. The effects of even the humblest artistic act are so far beyond either forecasting or guaranteeing that the artist cannot hope to control its consequences. Instead, as with other human acts, she must look inward to her own values, judgement and in-

tegrity. We cannot control what others hear but we can try, at least, to speak wisely and well, when we speak at all.

A very old Irish man lies in a hospital bed, propped up on his pillows. The end cannot be far. Around him stand four or five people in the prime of life: relatives and friends. He is singing a satirical tale of his own composition. He is the entertainer. He holds their attention, not because he may be dying, but because he has this funny, tuneful story to share. 'I sing the body electric': indeed. As he finishes, there's a spontaneous and perfectly natural round of applause. Those who witnessed this performance, even I who have seen it only as a home-made video recording, perhaps you who read it here, are changed by the event. The artist is silenced only in death; the person remains a person to the last.

I'm so glad that you finally made it here
 With the things you know now, that only time could tell
 Looking back, seeing far, landing right where we are
 And oh-oh oh-oh-oh oh-oh, you're aging,
 oh oh-oh-oh oh-oh and I am aging,
 oh oh-oh-oh oh-oh, aren't we aging well?

Dar Williams, 1993





Last words

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The Baring Foundation was established in 1969 and has been an active supporter of the voluntary sector, international development and the arts ever since. The foundation strengthens its work by focusing on often neglected issues for several years at a time, with the aim of bringing about lasting change. In 2009, the arts committee made a five year commitment to supporting work in the arts with older people, with an initial fund of £3 million. To date, it has supported the work of more than 50 organisations, published new research into the field, and initiated key developments such as Scot-

land's arts and older people festival, Luminare, whose first iteration is in October 2012. The foundation has also been an important convenor, bringing together public bodies, voluntary organisations and private enterprise, as well as many individuals with an interest in the arts and ageing.

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Mik Godley

Mik Godley's contribution to this book is obvious and enormous. The idea that art is a unique way of knowing is central to 'Regular Marvels', so each book is a collaboration with a different artist, whose response to the subject is as important as the text that it accompanies. The portraits by Mik Godley reproduced here are based on photographs I made, in discussion with the people they portray. Mik used these as the basis for his portraits, again in discussion with me and, indirectly, the sitters. The results are as important a reflection on the experiences described as the text itself: different, certainly, and using their own allusive methods to communicate, but absolutely central to *Winter Fires*. The images do not illustrate the text, any more than the text describes the images. They stand alone but the interaction between them, which one might metaphorically describe as a dialogue, creates a third kind of understanding: a regular marvel. This book would be much poorer without Mik's contribution and I am deeply grateful for the huge commitment he brought to this process.



Sources

All passages in italics are taken from interviews with artists listed as co-producers above; sources for other quotes are given below, with reference to the page on which the citation appears.

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- 20 'Proportion of European population...' from WHO *World Atlas of Ageing 1998*, quoted in Bond, J., Peace, S., Dittmann-Kohli, F. and Westerhof, G., eds., 2007, *Ageing in Society, European Perspectives on Gerontology*, London, p. 3.
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- 50 'One's ego becomes less and less interesting...' Sir Colin Davis, interviewed in *The Guardian*, 12 May 2011.
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- 60 'A lot of artists get very active...' David Hockney speaking in *The Art of Seeing, A Culture Show Special*, BBC, directed by Roger Parsons and first broadcast 28 February 2012; some hesitations and repetitions in Hockney's speech have been silently removed.
- 61 'All those things that sometimes seemed...' Tess Jaray, *The Age of Creativity*, BBC Radio 3, first broadcast 8 March 2011.
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- 71 'I'm so glad that you finally made it here...' from 'You're Aging Well' by Dar Williams, recorded for *The Honesty Room* (1993)
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