

# Outsiders Collaborating?

How creative relationships at Studio ARTES are opening doors for artists with intellectual disabilities

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## Abstract

*Outsiders Collaborating reflects on the experience working within a social, communal structure has on an individual who would typically be defined as an 'Outsider' artist. This paper examines the creative development of Mathew Calandra, an artist who has emerged from Studio ARTES Northside Inc. How has practicing inside Studio ARTES brought Mathew, a seemingly 'Outsider' artist, into the contemporary art mainstream?*

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Mathew Calandra works at McDonalds two days a week. He has done so for the last ten years. He cleans tables after McDonalds patrons have finished their meals, and takes great pride in his position. When not at McDonalds, Mathew dedicates two days per week to painting and drawing. After years of consistent arts practice, Mathew is developing a profile within Sydney's contemporary art scene. His curriculum vitae documents an exhibition history that includes both national and international curated exhibitions<sup>1</sup>. Income derived from the sale of artwork in 2010 enabled Mathew to travel to Egypt to celebrate his fortieth birthday. The artist's sophisticated portfolio of artwork led to his current placement as a guest artist with the prestigious Cicada Press within the College of Fine Arts. At COFA, Mathew works alongside superstar Australian artists the likes of Reg Mombassa, Elisabeth Cummings and Vernon Ah-Kee.

At forty, Mathew can sign his own name. However, his literacy skills extend little further. Mathew is affected by Down syndrome, as such, Mathew has significant intellectual and physical limitations. This paper reflects upon Mathew's artistic development, and in particular, reflects upon the role community and collaboration have played in Mathew's artistic practice. How is this seeming outsider establishing a presence for himself within the contemporary art scene, and how has being inside a network of relationships enabled Mathew's creative career to manifest?

## An Outsider?

To anyone familiar with the history of 'Outsider', the story of a talented artist with Down syndrome may not seem too unusual. The field of 'Outsider' Art in general describes artists who have neither accessed, nor have an awareness or understanding of the dominant cultural art systems. In Western culture the mainstream art system includes tertiary art institutions, such as a colleges or universities. The network of contemporary galleries, and the subtle interactions involved in finding representation in these venues, equally forms part of the mainstream Western art culture. An 'Outsider' artist would typically create artwork with little to no understanding or interest in these structures. In defining the term 'Outsider' author of "'Outsider': Spontaneous Alternatives", Prof. Colin Rhodes (2010, p. 70) explains;

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<sup>1</sup> Mathew Calandra's CV can be viewed at [www.studioartists.com.au](http://www.studioartists.com.au)

*It has come to embrace the work of artists springing from a fairly broad range of socio-cultural and socio-medical groups, ranging from the stereotypical, institutionalised psychotic to intellectually disabled people, mediums and untutored isolates. Often all that seems to connect the outsiders is their unconnectedness with the dominant art world and significantly, their absolute committedness to something the art world calls 'a practice'. No amateurs of art these; though often it is not art that they consider themselves to be making.*

As an artist with a significant intellectual disability, it seems sensible to position Mathew within the bracket of 'Outsider' artist. Mathew definitely creates his art outside of any intellectual, academic or historical understanding of Western art practice, an awareness most aspiring artists are indoctrinated with when undertaking any formal art education. Whilst Mathew has exposure to, and draws influence from, a vast library of visual art texts, when asked to discuss art work by significant artists featured within this library, such as Picasso or Arthur Boyd, Mathew's standard response is "I like it". Indeed, when asked his opinion on most artwork, including his own, Mathew simply and adamantly replies "It's very good".

Mathew enjoys painting and drawing, and he is keen to experience the art work of others. Yet he displays no interest, nor capacity, for intellectualising about art. Mathew draws great satisfaction from seeing his own work in exhibitions. Given half a chance, Mathew presents with pride exhibition catalogues and invitations which feature his artwork to anyone he meets. But, if asked the name, let alone if asked the standing of a particular gallery within the context of Sydney's contemporary art culture, Mathew would likely stare blankly. Mathew's intellectual disability clearly positions him differently to other emerging artists operating within Sydney's contemporary art culture. As such, it would seem logical to term Mathew an 'Outsider' artist. However, there are other aspects to Mathew's practice which do not fit so easily within the bracket of 'Outsider' artist. As the term implies, 'Outsider' artists have historically worked outside the broader community. 'Outsider' artists typically work alone, driven to create by their own self motivation, characteristically creating with little interest in sharing their practice or work with wider society. Prof. Colin Rhodes (2000, p.15) again explains;

*individual 'Outsider' creators seldom even know of each other, let alone form a cohesive group ... the difference is not merely marked by exclusion from the mainstream of the professional (western) art world, but also by an exclusion from, or marginalisation in relation to, the very culture that supports the market for mainstream art.*

However, in stark contrast to a typical 'Outsider' artist, Mathew refuses to make art alone or independently. Mathew's mother reports the artist firmly rejects her encouragements for him to draw at home. Mathew is steadfast in his determination to only create art work at Studio ARTES Northside.

### **Inside Studio ARTES**

Studio ARTES is an independent, not for profit organisation located in the northern Sydney suburb of Hornsby<sup>2</sup>. The organisation offers creative programs for over one hundred adults with disabilities. Mathew has practised painting and drawing within the full time visual arts program for over ten years. He attends twice a week, and it is at Studio ARTES that Mathew and I first met. I have been employed as an arts worker within Studio ARTES since 2006.

Initiated in 2000, Studio ARTES offers visual and performing arts programs for adults with disabilities. In addition, the organisation operates its own gallery where program participants are able to sell their art work and derive an income. Participants of Studio ARTES programs are referred to as 'members'. Studio ARTES is one of several national and international organisations that encourage the creative expression of adults with disabilities. Located in Melbourne, Arts Project

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<sup>2</sup> Further information can be found about Studio ARTES at [www.studioartes.com.au](http://www.studioartes.com.au)

Australia is internationally one of the most established and respected art studios for adults with disabilities<sup>3</sup>. Started in the early 1970's, Arts Project Australia was one of the first such studios to appear. As an emerging industry, language used to explain these studios is still forming. Terminology recently used to describe these creative studios includes Prof. Rhodes phrase "Other Academies" and Accessible Arts suggestion of "Supported Studios"<sup>4</sup>. For simplicity, I will use the term Supported Studios.

Supported Studios are distinguishable from other creative programs for adults with disabilities in the priority they place on developing art work. Supported Studios approach adults with disabilities principally as potential artists, rather than as individuals requiring therapy or entertainment. Whilst Supported Studio participants may derive recreational or therapeutic benefits from attending the creative programs offered, key to a Supported Studio is the opportunities they offer participants to engage in "art for art's sake". In his article "An Other Academy: Creative Workshops for Artists with Intellectual Disabilities", Prof Rhodes compares a selection of international Supported Studios, including Studio ARTES. In identifying a commonality between their working practices, Rhodes (2008, p.131) says;

*Despite variations of methodology, all share a belief in the aesthetic value of the product, not only as personally relevant to the maker, but also as being of intrinsic artistic merit. 'Clients' are regarded as artists first and foremost. The fact that they are differently abled is merely the impetus for providing appropriate support for the nurturing and realisation of artistic ambition, rather than their defining characteristic.*

Rhodes (2008, p.131) goes onto explain the importance of a Supported Studio as a structure that "not only supports but also *produces* artists." In "An Other Academy" Rhodes distinguishes many of the high profile artists to have emerged from Supported Studios from typical 'Outsider' artists. The history of 'Outsider' is proliferated with artists who have created impressive and often monumental bodies of work in solitary, driven by their own determination. In contrast to the typical 'Outsider' artist, Rhodes argues that many of the known artists to have emerged from Supported Studios would never have developed their portfolio of work without the encouragement of this broader studio network.

Describing Supported Studios as 'producing' artists is not intended to detract from the talent of the individual artists, like Mathew Calandra, who are emerging from Supported Studios. Nor does Rhodes infer that everyone who accesses such a studio will develop into an artist. Indeed, of the one hundred and ten members who weekly access the Studio ARTES program, only a handful of members consistently produce work that would likely catch the eye of curators or collectors. Rather, in 'An Other Academy', Rhodes concentrates on one effect and value of Supported Studios. For Rhodes, a key value of a Supported Studio like Studio ARTES is the opportunity it offers adults with intellectual disabilities to explore, and at times discover, their creative capacity. Rhodes asserts that this capacity would likely lie dormant without the resources and encouragement of what Rhode terms 'Other Academies'.

### **Mathew inside Studio ARTES**

This paper considers the impact working within the communal, social space of Studio ARTES has on Mathew Calandra's artwork? Has, as Prof. Rhodes would infer, Studio ARTES 'produced' the Mathew Calandra ... the Artist?

I cannot say definitively whether Mathew Calandra would have developed the sophisticated portfolio of art work he has today without the support of Studio ARTES. However, I can testify to having

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<sup>3</sup> More information about Arts Project Australia is available at [www.artsproject.org.au](http://www.artsproject.org.au)

<sup>4</sup> Accessible Arts is a NSW advocacy body for the arts and disability sector. Further information can be found on their website at [www.aarts.net.au](http://www.aarts.net.au)

witnessed an evolution in the quality of his arts practice over the nearly six years I have worked with Mathew. In addition, I have been privy to the influence working within Studio ARTES has had on the nature of work Mathew has created, influences which include myself and other arts workers, and the impact of Mathew's peer members creating within Studio ARTES.

Studio ARTES visual arts program operates five days per week, with two sessions per day. Approximately ten members participate in each session. Mathew has always worked within the program with a quiet focus. Never one to cause any trouble, or make a fuss, in the years I have worked with Mathew he has always been content to sit and work in accordance with the programs weekly theme. In my initial few years within the art program, Mathew always dutifully produced an artwork appropriate for the Studio ARTES annual exhibition. His work would be exhibited alongside that of Studio ARTES hundred or so other members, and Mathew would seem to enjoy the fanfare of being in the annual show.

However, around 2009 I began to look twice at Mathew's work. Mathew's drawing has always tended toward the naive in style. But, in 2009 he began to produce work that was still naive, but which was also compellingly sophisticated. And he began to produce this work consistently. It was as though Mathew's work had shifted from being merely naive, to being masterfully naive. Mathew's line work had always had an awkwardness, but in the work which emerged from 2009 the artist seemed able to manipulate this awkwardness to imbue his drawing with a character and life force. In the manner of Egon Schiele, Mathew's drawing style began to possess a dynamic, almost tenuous energy. Mathew's masterfully naive line work has only progressed since then. As evidenced in his work included through this paper, Mathew has a capacity to create compelling, animated imagery.

So, what has been the role of Studio ARTES in the development of this art work? In looking back at the work Mathew has created at Studio ARTES over the last decade, there is a distinct progression in his work. As described above, his drawing style has shifted from simplistic and somewhat clumsy, to a style that still encompasses the raw energy of his early work, but which manages this raw energy with a sense of confidence and style.

Both Mathew and his mother maintain Mathew rarely draws at home. As such, it seems likely that without Studio ARTES Mathew would not have developed an art practice independently. In viewing Mathew's early work, it is clear the artist was not simply gifted with a spontaneous, innate ability to create compelling imagery. Whilst I do not dispute Mathew has a level of natural ability in drawing, I equally argue that it has been the artists commitment to and consistent weekly practice within the Studio ARTES art program that has enabled his ability to manifest. It seems unlikely Mathew would ever have developed the level of artistic skill demonstrated in his recent portfolio of work if left to create in the manner of many 'Outsider' practitioners, that is, alone in private at home. Instead, it seems that working within the social, supportive network of Studio ARTES has enabled Mathew's talent the time, space and necessary tuition to develop.

### **Studio ARTISTS**

Furthermore, it seems undeniable that working within Studio ARTES has shaped the nature of work Mathew has developed. In creating work at Studio ARTES Mathew does not work in a vacuum. As an artist he is influenced by the social world that surrounds him. The impact of the Studio ARTES community on Mathew artwork became particularly evident when Mathew joined the Studio ARTIST initiative in late 2010.

Mathew is one of several individuals to have evolved from the Studio ARTES art program who display a distinct skill in and commitment to creating art work. In late 2010 I and two other Studio ARTES arts workers, initiated a program within Studio ARTES to cater specifically to the needs of

members like Mathew. Hence, Emma Johnston, Maide Welch and I initiated the Studio ARTISTS collective<sup>5</sup>. Studio ARTISTS consists of five members from Studio ARTES, they being Mathew Calandra, Daniel Kim, Greg Sindel, Robert “Thom” Smith and Lynda Strong. Whilst there are several other members who could equally qualify as Studio ARTISTS, our minimal resources determined our decision to limit the size of the Studio ARTIST initiative.

At its core, the Studio ARTISTS initiative aims to enable these five artists access to diverse creative opportunities, and to broaden the audience exposed to their work. The initiative was publically launched with a residency and exhibition at Callan Park Gallery<sup>6</sup> in March 2011. Never having worked together as a collective before, the five Studio ARTISTS bravely ventured beyond the comfort zone of their Studio ARTES art room. Part of Sydney College of the Arts, the Studio ARTISTS undertook a month long residency within Callan Park Gallery.

Three out of the five Studio ARTISTS are affected by autism. As such, changes in routine are more complicated for these individuals than for most. As arts workers, my co worker Emma Johnston and I were less than certain as to the direction this residency would take. Whilst each Studio ARTIST voluntarily participated, we were entirely uncertain how each individual would react to working in this foreign environment, especially as they were working as part of a newly formed Studio ARTISTS collective. Prior to the Callan Park residency, these five artists had never worked exclusively together as a unit.

The Studio ARTISTS were offered free reign within Callan Park. They were welcome to create as they liked, and were invited to work directly onto the wall if so inclined. Encouraging individual creativity is a key principle of Studio ARTES, yet, in the weekly operating art program the members tend to work in accordance with particular designated themes. The residency at Callan Park offered the five Studio ARTISTS a unique opportunity to create completely without direction. Each of the five were encouraged to initiate their own projects.

To the surprise of Emma and myself, the work which emerged spoke loudly of the interest each Studio ARTIST had in the artistic practice of their peers. With the exception of Greg Sindel, the remaining four Studio ARTISTS drew inspiration from the work of one another. To illustrate this interaction I will focus on the work of Mathew Calandra.

Mathew contributed five artworks to the final exhibition, ‘Studio ARTISTS: Untitled’<sup>7</sup>. Using ink and gouache, Mathew completed portraits of four Studio ARTISTS (including a self portrait). Mathew’s final artwork was in response to a collage work created by fellow Studio ARTIST Robert “Thom” Smith. Robert had selected a photograph from a random sales catalogue of a smiling baby. In the artist’s typical fashion, Robert used a texta pen to adorn the photographed baby with a bright orange moustache. Known as ‘Mo Baby’, Mathew delicately painted a response to Robert’s photocopied image.

Several of the Studio ARTISTS were compelled to create their own personal interpretations of Robert “Thom” Smith’s moustached baby photocopy. ‘Studio ARTISTS: Untitled’ featured various, very individual versions of “Mo Baby”. The repetition of the moustached baby symbology spontaneously united the final exhibition with a consistent theme. Yet, beyond contributing a necessary and surprising sense of cohesion to the final group show, the inspiration each Studio ARTIST independently found within each other’s work also reflected the presence of a powerful dynamic operating between these artists. During the Callan Park residency, the Studio ARTISTS

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<sup>5</sup> The site [www.studioartists.com.au](http://www.studioartists.com.au) profiles the Studio ARTISTS initiative.

<sup>6</sup> Callan Park Gallery was initiated in conjunction with STOARC (Self Taught and ‘Outsider’ Research Centre) at Sydney College of the Arts, Sydney University. Further information can be found at <http://sydney.edu.au/sca/research/projects/stoarc.shtml>

<sup>7</sup> Images and reviews from this exhibition can be viewed at [www.studioartists.com.au](http://www.studioartists.com.au) and [www.academies.com](http://www.academies.com)

developed a collaborative artistic practice. Working as a collective had a marked impact in the art work each member produced.

Whilst the nature of each Studio ARTIST's individual intellectual disability isolates each of these artists from the mainstream contemporary art culture, these artists do not create in isolation. Mathew is not immune to the arts practice of his peers. Now Mathew's work is coloured by the practice of the network of artists he works beside. The art work Mathew creates is the outcome of both his own developed style and skill base, and the nature of the environment and community he works within. In this way Mathew's art practice can be understood as an inherently collaborative activity, as opposed to as an exclusively 'Outsider', isolated pursuit.

### **Myself and Mathew**

Mathew's fellow Studio ARTISTS are not his only creative collaborators. I must also acknowledge my role as a creative collaborator with Mathew. As an arts worker I crucially impact the direction of Mathew's work. Studio ARTES has a "hands off", low intervention policy in regard to the interaction between arts workers and members art works. However, it would be absolutely ridiculous and pointless for me to deny the imprint Studio ARTES arts workers unwittingly have on the nature of member's artwork.

Mathew is currently involved as a guest artist in Cicada Press<sup>8</sup> at the College of Fine Arts, Sydney. Under the tuition of master printmaker Michael Kempson, Mathew is completing a series of etchings. Before attending COFA, Mathew had no concept of the possibility of printmaking. Having a history in printmaking myself, I was able to recognise how fluidly Mathew's linear drawing style would translate into etching. Hence, I suggested Michael and Mathew meet. Now, Mathew's portfolio of work and skill base involves printmaking.

Mathew appears to be flourishing within Cicada Press. The artist eagerly meets me at Hornsby station each week from where we begin our train trip to COFA. Cicada Press director, Michael Kempson, reports Mathew as the first artist he has witnessed to shake with excitement upon entering the print room. Mathew's mother glowed with pride upon informing me how, since joining Cicada Press, Mathew is the happiest he has been since before his father past away, when the artist was age eight. That is the happiest Mathew has been in over thirty years. The network of creative relationships and experiences Mathew is developing through his artistic practice seem to have an undeniably positive effect on the quality of his artwork, and importantly, upon his own well being. However, these experience and their effects are the result of collaborations. Mathew is very unlikely to have sought out a print making studio for himself to work within. His involvement in Cicada Press is the result of a myriad of connections, in particular between Mathew, Michael and myself.

### **In Conclusion**

Mathew's body of artwork, and his emerging career as a professional artist, is the result of a series of collaborations between the artist and Studio ARTES, Studio ARTISTS and now the Cicada Press. These relationships have not only enabled Mathew's creative capacity to manifest, they have in turn coloured Mathew's very sense of himself.

As Mathew's art work has matured, and as opportunities have opened for him to further develop his practice, Mathew's sense of self has matured in parallel. At the launch of the 'Studio ARTISTS: Untitled' exhibition, with a smug smile across his face, Mathew offered me his business card. Of his own initiative Mathew had organised the design and printing of his own business cards, with the profession "Artist" printed below his name.

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<sup>8</sup> For further information on Cicada Press please visit <http://www.cofa.unsw.edu.au/research/research-units/cicada-press>

## References

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