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# drawing future

charcoal for children charity exhibition 2016/17

*"Creativity is intelligence having fun"*  
— Albert Einstein

## **drawing future : charcoal for children**

bringing creative communities together

What is in a charcoal?

Black, dirty... that is what many people associate charcoal with. In Indonesia, charcoal may be associated with satay, and in Australia, perhaps BBQ! If you had experienced 'Bali Belly', you probably would have popped charcoal pills to neutralise your upset tummy.

Then there is the other charcoal that is used for drawing. Indeed, charcoal has been used to make art for thousands of years. It has been said that cave paintings discovered all over the globe have shown how charcoal has been used in art for more than fifteen thousand years. It is believed that the drawings have been drawn with the charcoal created from burnt sticks, and it is likely that it did not take long after man discovered fire that man also discovered the bold and rich markings of the remnants of the fire. Cave painting from the Niaux cave in France is a fine example of this early existence of charcoal drawing.

In 'CHARCOAL FOR CHILDREN', a program initiated by CushCush Gallery (CCG), the medium is DIY charcoal made using twigs and off-cuts timber, to fuel creativity amongst children, and to bring artists and creative communities together!

The use of DIY charcoal as a medium is a deliberate one, relating to its significance in its history and tradition, as well as how it is closely linked to our natural environment and progress in humanity. The program is part of 'LagiLagi',

an initiative that aims to encourage creativity amongst children and is free for children 8–16 years old.

In each session, children learn the process of making DIY charcoal before they explore different techniques and work together with invited artists to create collaborative artworks. At the end of 3 sessions, all the collaborative artworks are celebrated through a charity group exhibition, and the proceeds of works sold will fund future CHARCOAL FOR CHILDREN sessions.

Creativity does not need much. A twig from our environment, a community who is passionate about sharing the awareness of environment and goodness of creativity, arts and design, and children who want to have fun!

Through CHARCOAL FOR CHILDREN, LagiLagi and CCG hopes that the ordinary charcoal will trigger a 'wave' of creativity-loving children (as well as parents!!) by emphasizing the generation and expression of ideas in a non-evaluative framework. By making learning fun, and giving children the freedom to discover things they love, and encouraging them to sort out their values and interests, children learn to be confident to think critically and creatively. Important traits for our future generation!

Help us develop future leaders and innovators.  
Join the movement and support creativity!



## rules, imagination, and magic powder

naima morelli

"These are just scribbles – my kid could do it". How many times have we heard this sentence when facing a modern or contemporary work of art? In my opinion, we should reconsider the negative element of this statement. If your kid can do it and your kid can appreciate it, the work has probably great potential. I have heard of collectors going to art fairs with their little children, and let them do the first skimming between the hundreds of artworks on display.

Restoring their childlike spirit is indeed what many artists are, and have historically been after. In the modernist period of European art, and even more so in contemporary art globally, children have been a huge inspiration for art. Artists such as Pablo Picasso, Niki De Saint Phalle and Juan Mirò intentionally simplified their figures and shapes to express themselves as spontaneously as possible. In more recent times, Basquiat or Cy Twombly followed in their footsteps. In Indonesian contemporary art this trend is particularly evident in the works of ex-ISI Jogja schoolmates and today international-travelling artists Eddie Hara and Heri Dono and the powerful work of Murni in Bali.

But enough with name-dropping! After all, what these artists were interested in wasn't at all to be included in art history books or to become part of the art system. It was indeed quite the opposite. These artists were looking for something primal and instinctual. Something that they reckoned children possess but where many have lost as they mature.

Of course we have to acknowledge the importance of art that is intellectual - , the type of art with references to culture, society and philosophy that children couldn't possibly grasp. But a great piece of art would speak on

many different levels. And in an art world biased towards intellectualism or driven by the market, it is refreshing to borrow, if only for a few moments, children's eyes. Of course, it is always wrong to idealize children as these perfect creatures, and talk about the child-like state – a natural state ruled by instinct and moods - as something to revert to. As idealistic a proposal it might sound, every parent knows that kids might be emphatic with animals suffering, but not necessarily with their schoolmates playing with their toys, and not a bit with their own mother. Even if we want to go back to the previous example, when confronted with art, children they might go for the quick hit of a fancy colourful Jeff Koons rather than for the contemplative work of a Richard Serra (even though they might not know and care about the quotation of either). And that is when education comes into the picture.

While there is work that we get to appreciate based on our experience and honed sensitivity, and eight-year-olds have of course a limited one, as adults we must prepare the ground for children to create their own world and to develop their own sensitivity. This is not an easy task, as we need to be close but not too close. We must leave space but not too much space – especially considering that we are living in a world which is filled with useless and sophisticated distractions. These tools of modernity, as useful as they might be, can easily coax children away from values which are underlying and important.

This is why charcoal is important. An important material to what the primitive man used to realize their first cave paintings, charcoal is found everywhere. It is truly a piece of design from nature, in terms of minimalism and efficiency (and we know often that nature is the best designer, look at oranges or peas!)

We live in a society where between a charcoal and a videogame, a kid will definitely prefer the latter. I was reading a comic book not so long ago called "Last Man". It tells the story of eight-year-old Adrian who is participating in a series of martial arts tournaments in a fantasy world. He comes from a rural village where there is no access to technology, and the connection of people with nature allows for the spirit of the elements to manifest, and to eventually be used by fighters like Adrian in sparring sessions.

Through a series of circumstances, Adrian and his mother – a baker with great fighting skills (women power!) – end up in a modern city full of unhealthy temptations and driven by market ethos. It is something a young boy from Tenganan Pegringsingan village could experience on his first trip to Jakarta. Throughout the story we see Adrian and his mother being seen by the other characters as almost anachronistic. From the readers' perspective though, their naivety in contrast with the big bustling urban life is something we deeply empathize with. It is what we would like to have for ourselves and our children.

In the comic book, Adrian is the epitome of the good child. He is jaded when approaching a video-game for the first time; his only whim is not for expensive toys, but for a dusty book of fairy tales and enchantments. When attacked in the street he doesn't want to fight because "It is against the rules to fight outside of the arena". We usually see rules and imagination as two

forces somewhat opposite to each other. Of course, we know that opposites are generally also complementary – one cannot exist without the other. In children's education we tend to lean towards one end of the spectrum. We know that imagination can happen only within set rules. Yet, these rules have to be, if not customised, at least loose enough to allow creativity to happen. When the rules are too tight, it becomes normal to try carving just a little more room within them. But when these are completely absent, everything can happen, and we go back to the rule of nature: survival of the fittest and the strongest.

This doesn't apply only to society, but to the creative process of individuals as well. We all need rules in order to cultivate our imaginative self, but we don't want to become a mechanical human, slave of other people's rules, or from our own. As I see it, to be human is to be able to live and work between these two axis; it is about maintaining a certain degree of inner harmony between rules and imagination, spirit and necessity. The latter – the need to earn a living - might not apply to children, at least not to the luckiest ones, as their parents will provide for them. But even in the most fortunate cases, the family might insist in pushing their children toward a certain type of education or job against the children's desire. While animated by the need of securing their girls and boys a future, parents are also getting them to be far from what fuels their spirit. Too much weight is put on the rational decision and planning, and too little listening to the children's natural inclinations.

This is the spirit that we are referring to when we talk about creativity, one that CHARCOAL FOR CHILDREN has set out to cultivate and elicit in its program, and which can easily be extinguished in the aforementioned distractions.

I was lucky enough to have had quite a bare education back in Italy. I was living in the countryside and playing with my brother until bedtime, as soon as school and homework were done. I was watching little television, doing a lot of climbing around, and restlessly moulding characters with plasticine. My brother and I were creating our own stories. As a little girl I was drawing a lot and putting together a handwritten school magazine called "Apple Flower".

I credit my parents for giving me an education with just enough rules and just enough freedom to get my homework done, and have the rest of the day to cultivate myself (even if back then I wasn't of course thinking about it in these terms, everything that was not school was just "play"). On the other hand, school wasn't really encouraging of creative activities. We studied art history only as a theoretical subject and never did much drawing. The drawings that I was secretly doing during the boring math and science classes were promptly ripped and thrown in the bin by unsentimental schoolteachers or worse, by evil classmates. And yet, that difficulty proved a good testing ground for me. I quickly realized that art was something which I had to cultivate "illegally", and never ever expected any praise for it. Art was something I'd just do because I couldn't help it. It

is your spirit, an inexplicable force within yourself guiding you, whatever the circumstances.

You can see this dynamic happening also in art systems all over the world. Of course, the response depends on one's personality. For a country, the response depends on the psychology of an entire culture. In Indonesia it is in the most unlikely of times – during the Suharto dictatorship – that the Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru was born; the New Art Movement which gave a surge of energy into the art scene which seemed condemned to decorativism by an oppressing political climate. This stubbornness continues today when, without any help from government, Indonesian artists are still doing a great job, making art which is the most appreciated across Southeast Asia.

Looking at the regional neighbourhood, we see a different scenario. In Singapore the art terrain was really watered – or rather chemically fertilized – according to local needs. Just because it has been artificially grown, it doesn't mean that it is not producing great results. Government art funding and a strong marketplace are indeed achieving a positive change in the local cultural environment and even in the national mindset. The government muscling its way into the arts with a planned strategy was the way to go in Singapore – a lean towards the rules side of the spectrum rather than the organic, fluid Indonesian way. These two approaches both work, depending on the circumstances and the desired effect. And looking at those big art systems, we can see how the fundamental concepts apply also

for children's education and creativity.

Creativity is kind of a buzzword today. But it is also so much more than that. We have talked about the importance of rules, but we didn't mention that today rules are stranger than ever. Nowadays we don't see one single person embodying the rule anymore. We are dealing with fragmented, evanescent power, which comes in the shape of paperwork, a lot of security in malls and obscure talk of financial index and titles which we don't even grasp most of the time.

And yet, with the technology available in the last decade, imagination is having for the first time a real opportunity of being in power, as the famous '67 slogan "Imagination to power" was declaring in European cities like Prague, Paris and Rome. Back then, in the West it was all about community. It was about coming together and imagining a better society against the backdrop of a very strict society full of very clear rules and standards. While today the Western population is mostly walking the lonely road of individualism, societies like the Indonesian - and the Balinese in particular - are blessed with a strong community element which still persists in the face of modernity. And art and creativity play an integral role in that. Looking at it with a sociological eye, community is a ground-up system of rules made by and for a

group of people. This developed naturally, without any single paper being signed. Community is about the joy and richness of coming together.

But individualism is rampant and, though it can allow unexpected possibilities, we have also to make sure our children will have a community anchor to go back to. Yes, a familiar place from where they "escape" from, and start their personal exploration of the world, whether in width (through geographical travel), or in depth (travelling within themselves).

As someone once said, modernity is the transition from destiny to choice. Through a screen, teenagers are conquering the world and, for better or worse, setting up the basis for the future. Technology has allowed artists to showcase their work on website born for that very function, it has allowed what used to be young kitchen-table-debaters to open their own YouTube channel and to express their opinion publicly. Teenagers don't have to conform in order to stand out in the internet sphere, quite the contrary. It is peculiarity and uniqueness that will make them stand out and create their own community. In their creative process, they are encouraged to "embrace their funk", as educator Josh Waitzkin puts it. The possibility of choosing, making small steps in the desired direction, is today more tangible

than ever. But in order to do all of that and still be grounded, happy, strong individuals, children have to cultivate a genuine spirit and feed their own imagination.

What we need to do with the new generations is not provide them with infinite choices, placing, like some parents do, a tablet in their children's hands before they can even speak. We must rather equip them with a toolbox for making their best choices in the future. Indeed, this proposition applies not only to the privileged kids who have the good fortune to have a tablet to play with, but also to those who don't, just like little Adrian of the aforementioned comic book. In my eyes, a bare education is the best, because it is democratic. What is democratic is human. And human is what we are looking for.

At the end of the day, creativity is imagination happening within rules. Creativity is an adjective to a noun, rather than a noun itself. Creativity is not a tangible object, but rather a magical powder that can be sprinkled everywhere: in your father's homemade biscuits, in your mother's finding a solution for fixing that broken window, in your neighbour's way of arranging flowers, or even in the handwriting of your colleague. And at CHARCOAL FOR CHILDREN, it is magical powder which comes in the colour black.

**Naima Morelli** is an art writer and journalist with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region. She is a regular contributor to CoBo Social, D\_Railed Magazine and Art a Part of Culture and arts writer for Middle East Monitor, Times of Malta and Global Comment. The Author of "Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un'introduzione" a book that focused on the development of contemporary art in Indonesia, Naima is currently working on a new book on the art system in Singapore. As a curator, her practice revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.



CushCush Gallery  
jl. teuku umar gg. rajawali no.1A,  
denpasar - bali, indonesia

[cushcushgallery.com](http://cushcushgallery.com)

