Billy Childish: Unknowable but Certain
17 February – 18 April 2010
ICA Learning Programme

Our dynamic, artist-led Learning Programme provides opportunities for schools, families and community groups to engage in creative ways with the ICA’s exhibitions. The gallery is open for school visits between 10am and 12pm, Monday – Friday and is just five minutes walk from Charing Cross Station. This pack is geared towards secondary school students pursuing Key Stages 3, 4 and 5. Teachers may find it useful to visit the exhibitions before bringing a group. If you would like to plan a trip to the ICA, get in touch and find out how we can meet the needs of your group. ICA Learning is focused on creating opportunities for exploration and discussion, providing participants with the tools and assurance to become informed spectators, confident participators and inspired creators.

What We Do

Artist Led Projects
Our programme includes artist-led workshops with schools and innovative collaborations between artists and community groups.

Teachers Packs
These are available with each exhibition and include exhibition notes, suggested discussion points and activities for your visit, how to prepare before attending the exhibition and proposed activities for the classroom.

Insets
The ICA offers professional development sessions for teachers as an opportunity to meet with artists and gallery staff, and discuss how best to incorporate contemporary art into young people’s learning.

Schools Mailing List
Keep up to date with the exciting learning projects, events and workshops happening at the ICA by signing up for our mailing list.

Teachers Previews
These private views are dedicated to learning resources and offer ideas for your pupils’ visit to the ICA. Come as a teacher or as yourself to enjoy a relaxing evening in the gallery.

The Fox Reading Room
The Fox Reading Room, situated off the bar and café area and adjacent to the ICA’s lower gallery, is our new resource space providing artist-selected publications and related material to accompany our visual arts programme. Our new space also provides learning resources for teachers and educators linking our exhibitions to the national curriculum. The Fox Reading Room was made possible by the generous support of the Edwin Fox Foundation.

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For more information and to view our archive of previous learning activities, please visit www.ica.org.uk/learning
Exhibition Concept

The ICA is proud to present a major solo exhibition by artist, musician and writer Billy Childish.

The artist was born in 1959 in Chatham in Kent, where he still lives, and his prodigious range of activities can best be understood as a total work of art – one which centres on his own extraordinary persona. Childish is a cult figure, and one who has gained an international following, but this exhibition is the first occasion on which a public institution has attempted to encompass his long and wide-ranging career.

The ICA’s Lower Gallery features a group of Childish’s recent paintings, which have an unusual command and power. It includes self-portraits of the artist, often shown hill-walking; images of boats on the Medway Estuary, where he lives; still lifes with flowers, featuring pots made by the artist’s mother; and paintings depicting the Swiss modernist writer Robert Walser, including works based on police photographs showing the author dead in the snow. Childish’s paintings are highly expressionistic, conveying a sense of the visionary significance that he discovers in objects, places and people. They also demonstrate the deliberate rejection of the contemporary world that is a feature of all his work.

The ICA’s Upper Galleries present Childish’s output as a musician and writer, covering a career which began in 1977, and providing a context within which the recent paintings can be understood. One room concentrates on his music, which has involved a huge range of collaborators and bands, and which maintains a stubbornly independent ethos originating in the punk era. The other room features books and pamphlets containing Childish’s writings, often designed and published by him and illustrated by his own woodcuts. The display includes polemical and campaigning literature, but also his more personal poetry and prose, much of which is profoundly autobiographical in nature.

The exhibition has been curated by Richard Birkett of the ICA and Matthew Higgs of White Columns, New York, and is staged concurrently with an exhibition of the artist’s paintings at the latter venue (5 March – 17 April 2010).

Mark Sladen
Director of Exhibitions, ICA
Painting has been a consistent part of Childish’s practice since the late 1970s, and for many years he concentrated his painting into a few weeks of the year, during which time he would work intensely to produce a large number of canvases, most of them made in just a few hours each. In the mid 1980s Childish shifted this pattern, since when he has spent most weekends painting at his mother’s house in Whitstable, Kent, where an upstairs bedroom serves as his studio. The paintings in the ICA’s Lower Gallery are all made since 2007, in oils (with charcoal under-drawing), and display subjects and compositions that have recurred in the work of this period – while Childish does not consciously work in series, he often returns to certain themes and motifs.

Across thirty years of painting Childish’s work has been largely autobiographical and expressive, often employing the self-portrait as a means to register experience and emotion. While his approach to the act of painting is intuitive and physical, his compositions consciously echo the work of artists with whom he has an affinity, including the early modernist painters Edvard Munch, Mikhail Larionov and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, along with the writers Fyodor Dostoevsky, Knut Hamsun and Robert Walser. This network of influences is echoed in Childish’s depiction of the artist as anti-hero, a creative archetype that embodies the intensity of worldly experience and the problematic attempt to translate it into art.

Walser, a Swiss modernist writer who died in 1956, is the subject of a group of recent works by Childish, and a number of these paintings are exhibited here. Walser’s most radical works coincided with his committal to a mental home, and he died from a heart attack while walking in the snow near the sanatorium. Childish’s paintings of Walser include images of the writer’s death, based on original police photos.
photographs of the scene, and imbued with elegiac and dream-like qualities through the use of thick impasto to build up the snow-bound scene. Walser was known for his habit of taking long nocturnal walks, and walking in the landscape is important to Childish as well. The painter has often returned to the image of the flaneur, and in his pictures of Walser this figure takes on a special poignancy, and the notion of walking a wider resonance – as a metaphor for the artist’s attempts to order his experience of the world.

The pictures of Walser overlap with a group of self-portraits by Childish, which show the artist in the midst of towering landscapes, including the Atlas Mountains. In some of these pictures the artist is depicted in a yellow suit, making reference to a character in Mysteries, Hamsun’s novel of 1892. The character of Nagel is a radical, almost Christ-like figure who arrives in a small Norwegian town wearing a yellow suit, and who proceeds to create turmoil in the contented community through his eccentric and provocative behaviour. The existential notion of a man ‘out-of-time’ is present in the writings of both Hamsun and Walser, and is also evident in much of Childish’s work, which expresses a desire for a spiritual response to the world, a response often cast in opposition to the status quo.

While the intensity of Childish’s paintings reflects the immediacy of emotional experience, their subject matter speaks of a deeply ingrained personal history and iconography. Another group of works made in recent years depict old moored steamboats and other ships on the Medway Estuary. These images are evocative symbols of the region where Childish has lived for much of his life, and reflect his own personal experience of working in the Chatham dockyard as a teenager. They also evoke the persistence of such industrial icons in folk memory, and conjure up a decelerated response to contemporary living that is very characteristic of the artist.

If a sense of temporality and mortality is central to many of the paintings within this exhibition, then a group of still lifes provides an equivalent meditation on the vibrancy of existence. Evoking the composition, gesture and intense hues of Van Gogh’s flower paintings, these works are also marked by Childish’s choice of vessels. Each brown vessel appears to be a kind of totem, bearing primitive human or animal features that are sometimes menacing, at other times comedic. These vases have a very specific meaning for Childish, as they are made by his mother, June Lewis, a practice she began after a trip to Bali. One of these vases can be seen at the ICA, placed at reception to welcome visitors to the exhibition, and displaying flowers selected by the artist.

Upper Galleries

The ICA’s Upper Galleries are devoted to presentations of Childish’s work as a writer, musician, and filmmaker, covering a period of over thirty years. Operating in parallel to his visual art, his output in disciplines rooted in text, music and performance has been equally prolific, standing as testament to a totalising approach to creative endeavour.

The left hand room in the Upper Gallery focuses on the written word, featuring poetry and prose produced by Childish from 1977 to the present. Childish’s writing, and specifically his poetry, has a special place in his practice – as the clearest manifestation of the autobiographical dynamic at the heart of his work. His early poems depict a life of poverty in Chatham, moving from an alcohol-infused sexual urgency to his rulings against authority and conventional forms of work. The starkness of this verse is countered by a deeply affecting poetic humour, built on Childish’s observations of the people around him. A series of poems by Childish written from the 80s onwards are on view on the walls of the gallery, and as his poetry develops there is a noticeable shift towards more abstract reflection, including the interrogation of his position as an artist, and a broader spiritual enquiry.

The gallery also features a wealth of books, pamphlets and fanzines, the majority of them self-published. Stemming from a distinctly punk ethos, born of both necessity and antagonism, Childish has maintained an independent approach to releasing his own and others’ writing. He has helped initiate and run a number of DIY imprints, beginning with Phryoid Press, founded in the late 70s by Childish with his friend and fellow poet Sexton Ming. After this, in the 80s and early 90s, The Hangman imprint became the mainstay of Childish’s publishing activities, releasing his own writings alongside that of the Medway Poets (a performance poetry group including Childish, Ming, Bill Lewis, Miriam Carney, and Charles Thomson) and Tracey Emin. Childish has also made numerous connections with other independent presses around the world, leading to his work being translated and published internationally.

The selection of printed material exhibited here includes rare, one-off publications, as well as editions customised by Childish. Ranging from early Xeroxed fanzines containing poetry and song lyrics, to collections of woodcut prints and novels with hand-painted covers, this material demonstrates the synthesis that Childish achieves between visual and textual language. Using a more graphic style than his paintings, yet exhibiting the same brevity of mark and directness of image, his prints and drawings play an important role in constructing the iconography of his poetry and prose.

The second room of the Upper Galleries introduces Childish’s musical output. As in his work in other disciplines, Childish is remarkably prolific as a musician and songwriter, and since the formation of his first group in 1977 – the Pop Rivets – he has worked with an extraordinary number of bands, under names such as Thie Headcoats, Wild Billy Childish and the Members of the British Empire, and
(most recently) The Vermin Poets. Childish’s commitment to the headlong and apparently unedited production of music is characteristically unconventional, and the bands with whom he has worked have also routinely refused to operate through the established music industry, despite enthusiastic critical and public followings.

The music that Childish makes is usually infused with a punk sensibility, favouring a short burst of vocal, guitar and drum-based energy. Yet his songs also reveal a debt to the blues tradition and to a lineage of garage rock since the mid 60s, including bands such as The Kinks, The Who and The Pretty Things. Production is approached with the most basic of means, and Childish’s live performances and recordings utilise old valve amps and minimal technological manipulation of sound. The result is raw and tight, creating a perfect foil for Childish’s lyrics, which combine simple rhymes and repetitions with the personal narratives and reflections familiar from his written work. A number of recordings are available for visitors to listen to in the gallery.

As with his writing, many of the albums produced by Childish have been issued through his own imprints – or through small independent labels, whether in Britain or abroad – and this room features the covers of the majority of the LPs he has produced, creating a wall of imagery. This archive also reflects some of the visual iconography that is present across the artist’s practice, including his self-portraits, and is one way in which he links himself to his artistic forebears. However, Childish has also created an actual yellow suit, which can also be found on show in the Upper Galleries. This outfit has been worn by the artist as part of a series of performance-protests that he has conducted since 2008, under the banner of the British Art Resistance. In this project Childish takes on the role of the Son of Art, a supposed saviour of the artistic community, leading the way through his creative spirituality. It is a role which is posed with tongue in cheek, but which reflects the passionate engagement with the world that runs through all of Childish’s activities.

Richard Birkett
Curator, ICA
THEMES AND ACTIVITIES
1. The Ideal of Amateurism

‘The meaning of amateur is to do something for the love of it, and of course I am not really an amateur but it is a way of having a lightness of touch by describing yourself as an amateur. Amateurs are the ones who make the real breakthroughs, they’re the heroes, and I am much more interested in being a hero than a professional’.

Billy Childish

Billy Childish left secondary school education at 16, an undiagnosed dyslexic. On the basis of his work he was later accepted into St Martin’s School of Arts to study painting, regardless of his poor academic achievements. However he was expelled before completing the course for his outspokenness and unorthodox working methods.

As prolific a writer as he is a painter and musician, Childish has created a huge body of work. It is characterised by a rough, primary quality and he declines to have his written work amended before print. This apparently illiterate style is only an appearance, as Childish commands a concise and highly effective technique. Embracing the ideal of amateurism and independence, the artist has always shown through his work a strong willingness to reject established values.

In the classroom

In a group of three or four students, take a look at this poem by Billy Childish:

the professor of confessional art

sensitive people notice that my werk is about the love of nature only the vulger believe it to be foul mouthed an ex girlfriend simply wants it banned and demands that all of my futcher rittings be submitted to her loyers for vetting “i will decide if you are allowed to publish or not nothing of what happened will be known whilst i am still alive” she promises “fine” i answer and i mean it and sinserely wish her victory

In the gallery

• Why do you think the artist refuses to have his misspellings corrected?
• What do you think it says about his personality and his intentions as an artist?
• How do you think this poetic style may relate to the ideal of amateurism and the rejection of the established order?

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• What characteristics do these pieces have in common? How does this amateur or brut aesthetic impact on the quality of the work?
Discussion

Childish has been unfavourably described as being resolutely independent of the concerns and interests of contemporary art practice. Many commentators and art critics have concluded that he is an untaught ‘outsider’ of the art world.

- Why do you think that Billy Childish has been considered as an outsider of the art world?
- Do you agree with this point of view? How may or may not the artist benefit from this criticism?
- Can you point out characteristics of his work that underline this point of view?

Activity

Find a classical poem that you know well and try to re-write it. (You could also do this with a poem you have written yourself) Do this quickly without thinking about spelling, grammar or form.

- How does it affect the general aesthetic of the poem?
- Swap with your classmate. Are you able to read their writing? What feelings does the piece generate?

Workshop

Automatic writing was a technique first used by the Dada and Surrealist artists, who have had a strong influence on Billy Childish. The artists of both movements created works through an automatic process. This process differs greatly from the method in which academic art is created, due to the irrationality and spontaneity by which the subconscious is expressed. Visual artists in these movements also tried to draw or paint ‘automatically’ by allowing their subconscious to play a large part in the creative process.

- Produce a written piece or a drawing using the method of automatism. As with the previous activity, do this quickly without thinking about spelling, grammar or form. Repeat the process several times.

Swap with a classmate and discuss the results.

- What sort of themes have you explored?
- What level of awareness was involved in the creative process? What do you think your piece says about your personality, your concerns, and your ambitions?

- How would you describe the aesthetic of your piece? Do you consider it as untraditional, non-academic or unorthodox? If so, which characteristics do you consider to subvert established or traditional values?
2. Characters

This poem, I am the Strange Hero of Hunger, is an interesting insight into Billy Childish's work and how he sees himself in relation to other artists and also his own value as an artist.

He could be described as a man who 'loves contradiction' and within that role as an artist he hides himself within characters he creates, possibly to explore the different elements making his whole. For example, he is known to use many different pseudonyms; William Charlie, William Hamper, William Loveday, Chatham Jack, Gustav Claudius, Charles Hangman, Jack Ketch, Rollin Slim, and Danger Bill Henderson to name a few.

Although the subject matter of Childish's work can be quite serious and dark there is still a sense of fun and enquiry to be found. Within both his music and art he uses different outfits or costumes to get into a particular 'role' he may be trying to portray. For example, a yellow suit that features in many of the artist's self-portraits has also been worn by the artist at British Art Resistance performance protests, with Childish taking on the role of the Son of Art. (NB: This outfit is displayed in the Upper Galleries.)

As well as exploring the different elements that compose his own persona/being, he also investigates and captures snap shots of characters in his paintings as seen in the series of the paintings featuring the Swiss modernist writer Robert Walser.
**Before the exhibition**

- Observe yourself throughout the day and write down the different roles or characters that you play. For example: What are you like in the morning with your parents or siblings, with your friends, or at school?

**During the exhibition**

- Which piece of art work in the exhibition do you most relate to?
- Does it reflect back to you who you are? If so, how?
- Are there any characters that re-appear throughout Billy’s work across the different mediums? Make a note.

**After the exhibition**

- There are many different ways in which extraordinary characters/personas are portrayed through Billy Childish’s work across a variety of mediums. Which do you think is most successful? Why?
- Chose one person (real or fictional) who you think has an extraordinary persona and explore that character through a medium of your choice.

**Workshop: Creating Characters**

Billy Childish has made over 200 albums which include a vast array of interesting album covers. Within these images, the use of costumes and outfits from different time periods are very prominent. This workshop invites teachers to explore cross curricular work with other subject areas such as Drama and Music. Looking at the way characters are created through the use of costume, ask students to bring in their own items of clothing from home or collaborate with the Drama department for resources.

- Working in groups of 4 or 5, pick any character you would like to portray in costume and stage a scenario. For example: rockers in a band, artists in the studio or historic figures from the past.

Once this scenario has been set up, take photographs thinking very specifically about posture, mannerisms that can be portrayed in character, body language as well as lighting and facial expressions. Props may also be included. Students should be encouraged to record these scenarios using sketches too. Using the photographs taken, discuss as a class how the use of costumes, dress and photography can be used to express different periods in time and how aspects of different characters can be presented.

- How can facial expressions change the mood of a photo?
- The use of colour or black and white?
- How important are album covers to the album, the band and the music?

Some students may show an interest in using film to further develop their ideas moving into a performative aspect of creating characters.

**Extended Task:**

Use the images made in this workshop to create album covers.

NB: There is a selection of Billy’s 45s in the Fox Reading Room in the ICA as well as in the Upper Galleries. Please feel free to use these for reference as well as the documentary ‘Billy Childish is Dead’.
3. Confessional Art

“Confessionalism is the movement by which contemporary culture has been marked in the past ten years, and its power shows no sign of dwindling. It has permeated everything from autobiography to women’s magazines, from talk shows to broadsheets...The stars of today are not the most talented, but the most open to voyeurism...From the hugely successful memoirs of Dave Peizer to the bitchiness of Big Brother, confessionalism is hot. It sells. The public want human nature at its most raw and vulnerable, and ‘art’ has been left trailing behind”. 

Clare Pollard, in Magma, 2001.

British artist Tracey Emin, who has been labelled ‘The Professor of Confessional Art’, has cited Billy Childish’s autobiographical approach as an important influence in her work. However the artists employ a very different approach and are divided on their opinion, cited here by Childish:

“In the long run Tracy just wants to be loved and accepted and to feel happy about herself. For that to be at all possible much has to remain locked down and hidden from view; which is fine if you don’t call yourself a confessional artist. Whereas I really do show the world everything, also hoping to be loved and accepted, but knowing that it will more likely have the opposite effect and that I will instead be derided and hated”.

Childish has produced much heavily confessional work detailing his love life and experience of sexual abuse, namely in his 1996 novel My Fault.*

“After a childhood of abuse at the hands of family and teachers, I couldn’t be ‘shut up’ any more...My anger was such that if My Fault hadn’t been written then, quite seriously, I would have killed”.
Billy Childish on his novel My Fault.

It is important to note that Confessional Art is not a new phenomenon; poets, writers, visual artists and musicians have “confessed” their own life experiences through their work for everyone to see. However Childish’s art is particularly brutal in its honesty leaving nothing uncovered.

Before the Exhibition

• Elect 2-3 students to debate in favour of confessional art. Argue that this genre of art is beneficial to society and has real value as art.
• Elect 2-3 students to debate against confessional art. Argue that certain things should not be shared with the world, that displaying your own life events does not necessarily qualify as art.
• Ask the two teams to debate their views with the rest of the class as their audience and then ask for a class vote as to which argument was more convincing.

During the Exhibition

Something to think about...
• Is confessional art cathartic?
• Is it a publicity stunt like celebrity ‘bare-alls’?
• Is it ‘truthful communication’ as Childish puts it?
• Is it a form of narcissism?

After the Exhibition

Painting and Drawing

Think of something in your life that you feel deeply about. It could be a childhood secret, a relationship, an experience. Even just a moment in your life you have really enjoyed or hated.
• Draw out and then paint a visual illustration of this experience with thought to making your painting as open and direct of your experience as possible. Students can then share what they have produced and explain their art work or leave it open for interpretation.

Writing

• Write a short poem, again using something personal to you as the subject. As with the painting activity, it does not have to address anything you do not want to share. But, as Childish demonstrates in his poetry, it must be open and honest about an issue or experience you feel strongly about.

* A copy of My Fault and other texts by Billy Childish can be found in the Fox Reading Room

4. The Artist as Outsider

When asked in an interview what question he would like to ask himself, Billy Childish responded “Why do I estrange myself from the world?”

The romantic image of the artist as an outsider; rebellious, passionate and unconventional, is a persistent archetype. Emerging in the late 18th century, it can be understood partly as a reaction against the Enlightenment, replacing the emphasis on rational thought, with that of the spiritual, intuitive and individual.

Billy Childish can be seen in many ways to embody this notion of the artist as outsider; from being thrown out of St. Martins College of Art for refusing to conform to their ‘orthodox’ working methods, to his rejection of mainstream culture as seen in his dress, subject matter and antipathy towards contemporary art practice.

Billy Childish places himself within a long tradition of alienated anti-heroes. He identifies strongly with figures such as the Swiss writer Robert Walser, who is the subject of many of his recent paintings. Robert Walser was in a mental institution for much of his adult life, although he initially enjoyed some recognition as a writer, he was to die alone in the snow, ignored and largely forgotten. Like Billy Childish, he loved walking in the countryside where he lived and also battled a drink problem.

A lot of Billy Childish’s work is autobiographical and there are various self-portraits in the exhibition, some of him hill-walking, as well as woodcuts and photographs. He uses the self-portrait as a “means to register experience and emotion.”

Robert Walser Lying Dead in the Snow, Oil and charcoal on linen, 2008 (detail) 
Courtesy of the artist and L-13 Light Industrial Workshop, London
In the classroom

Discuss the idea of the artist as outsider.
• How do you expect an artist to look and behave?
• Could this be thought of as a caricature or stereotype?
• Who personifies the idea of an artist?
• Can you still have integrity as an artist if you sell your work for millions of pounds?
• Do you think you can comment on society from a position outside of it, or do you need to be inside to really understand what is going on?

In the gallery

The emblem of the gallows or “hangman” is present across Billy Childish’s different practices; as a signature on his paintings, on his placards and as Hangman Books and Hangman Records. He says it symbolises “pain, suffering, gallows humour and humanity”. It also could bring to mind the idea of the outlaw, or perhaps refer to judgement.

• Try and find several instances of the hangman symbol in the works in the exhibition, what do you think it might mean?
• Find some of Billy Childish’s self-portraits. Does he look like you expected?
• Does the background, his clothes, his position tell you anything more about the artist?
• Look at his paintings of Robert Walser; are there similarities with his self-portraits?
• What type of man do you think he was?

After the visit

• Have you ever felt like an outsider? Different and as if you didn’t belong? When do you feel as if you are part of a group, that you are included? Discuss.
• Find or draw a picture of a landscape. Now insert a lone figure. What does the picture make you think of now? Add other figures to the scene, so there is a group. How does this change your understanding of the picture?

“The controlling side of the brain, the side that deals with concepts, is the left brain. The right brain – which is creativity and imagination, is, and always has been, bullied by the dominant, doctrinaire left brain.”
Billy Childish

Billy Childish’s approach to art is immediate and intuitive, in accordance with the artists he cites as influences such as Edvard Munch and Van Gogh. Try some exercises to develop your ‘right side’ thinking, perhaps a series of timed drawings starting with a few seconds and executed quickly without lifting your pencil from the paper.

Or try a pocket drawing by putting a folded piece of paper and a pencil into your pocket at the start of the day. Every now and then, without looking, make a few marks on the paper, occasionally refolding the paper so that a different area is used. At the end of the day, take the paper out and look at what you have produced, could you develop the marks further into a drawing?

Workshop

Make your own culture!

Much of Billy Childish’s written work and music is produced and published by himself. This was partly because of necessity. But also reflects the sometimes antagonistic, independent, DIY approach of punk. In his music he has refused to operate through the established industry, despite an enthusiastic following and critical recognition (he has been cited by both Kurt Cobain and Jack White of The White Stripes as an influence). This has parallels with the idea of the outsider artist, rejecting commercial success in favour of integrity.

• In this spirit of the amateur, can-do attitude; design, produce and print your own book/fanzine or pamphlet. Limit your materials to basic, cheap and accessible ones, and the printing to the most cost efficient. It could be a collection of your own drawings, poems, song lyrics or writing. Design the cover to be striking but able to be reproduced cheaply.
Often referred to as one of the most prolific artists of present time, Billy Childish has experience as a painter, musician and writer. But his ambition goes way beyond worldly glories and material successes, as he considers his artistic career primarily as a kind of spiritual practice that blurs with his own life.

The effortless creativity of real artists lies in the closeness between the artist’s mind and the materials that are being used or represented. In this physical and temporal proximity to his subject matter lies one of the main aspects of Childish’s philosophy; working fast becomes a way to truly engage with the moment, to live it.

Childish himself says that what he likes about painting pictures is just painting pictures in itself, as a physical action that avoids control and reveals itself as naturally attuned to his most intimate feelings.

Childish has been practising yoga for some time, and says that this has helped him to better understand his mental link with what he produces. The proximity of the artist to his material creation reaches now a spiritual level, as the artist’s role becomes that of facilitating the coming into life of an artwork. This metaphysical empathy driven by a material link is what Childish implies when he talks about his art practice as a way to feel alive and fully be as an individual. Art as a feeling of life, rather than art being used as a means for something else, namely material success.

Before the visit

Although lacking a formal art education, Vincent Van Gogh is celebrated as one of the greatest masters of all times and is often quoted by Billy Childish as being a great inspiration. As with Billy Childish, who is also self-taught, Van Gogh used to paint fast and was very prolific as an artist.

Have a close look at some of his works, and try to find some evidence of his fast painting technique. You might find it easier to look at the single brushstrokes rather than at the composition as a whole. Then look at some of his self-portraits, how do you feel about his way of conveying his emotions by condensing them in a few quick touches of brushstroke?

Some of the works on display at the ICA were made specifically for this exhibition and are shown in public for the first time. Discuss the issue of universality in art history in terms of formats (like the self-portrait) and styles that come back from the past and are re-worked in contemporary paintings.

During the visit

- Try to look closer at the works to which you feel naturally more attracted and drawn to. Do you perceive them as immediate for their particular aesthetic quality that originates from a quick painting process?
- Try again to find some evidences of this fast method of working, by standing close to the canvases. What can you say about your perception of the brushstrokes and the bold materiality of paint in Childish’s works?

After the visit

If you were to talk about Billy Childish’s painting style, what adjectives would you use to best describe it?
- Discuss this in relation to his lack of a formal art education.
Childish himself says that he has always been working between the tensions of his skills and letting the painting be what it is, with a lightness of touch that is possible only through a fine command of the technique.

- What do you think about the discipline - and at the same time the ability to loosen it - that being an artist involves? Site some contemporary artists to back up your thoughts.

**Workshop: Gesture Drawing**

Gesture drawing consists in quickly sketching the contours of a model that poses and keeps changing posture every 30 seconds. The main aim is to train the brain to capture the essence of a subject, linking the manual drawing ability with the mental faculty of seeing. The final result is not important, as you will be producing dozens of sketches instead of one single realistic rendering of details.

- Choose someone to model for the drawing class. This person should be fully visible by anyone and should distinctly change posture every 30 seconds. Using a pencil or pen and some blank sheets of paper, make quick drawings of each pose.

- Next, look at your subject and imagine you can draw only one line to represent it. You should first focus your attention where you can see tension, on the parts of the body that are conveying the energy of the action in that specific posture. Draw that one single line, the line of your subject, which is the most important thing you should take away from this drawing experiment.

- Once you’ve got the first fundamental sketch of the gesture, you can use the rest of your time to draw the contour lines and sketch the rest of the body, following no particular order and jumping freely from head to foot. Then, if there is any time left, you can represent mass with some circular motions, which can be lighter or darker according to where you see it.

You should use a new sheet of paper for each single posture.

During the whole process you should keep your hand moving, as you are trying to let the image transfer directly from your eyes to your hand without thinking about it. If you stop your hand, you will be separated from the pure action of drawing and start thinking. Hold your pencil loosely and keep your motions fluid (this technique is used as a warm-up of the muscles for other kinds of drawing), and don’t focus for too long on one single portion of your drawing. You can jump from one area to the other as freely as you wish. If you keep your eyes on the subject and keep drawing, you shouldn’t feel the temptation to ‘correct’ yourself.

Think about gesture drawing as if you were trying to catch the very essence of a person or a thing in a fleeting moment, like a butterfly that rests somewhere: you never know how much time you will have to do so before it flies away.

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*Drunk,*

Oil and charcoal on linen 2009,

Courtesy of the artist and L-13 Light Industrial Workshop, London
Useful Links

The official Billy Childish website: www.billychildish.com/home.html

Neal Brown’s ‘Billy Childish: A Short Study’ www.billychildish-ashortstudy.com/imprint.html

The Official Stuckists website: www.stuckism.com

“Getting Poetry to Confess”. An article by Clare Pollard about the nature of confessional art. www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=4935

“Being Childish”, an article for the New Statesman by Graham Bendel, exploring the relationship between Childish and Emin and their differing styles of confessional art. www.newstatesman.com/200007030039

A poetry website featuring information about and poems by Charles Bukowski, a huge inspiration to Childish’s writing and fellow “confessional” but also Beat poet. www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=924

“Arist As Victim, Artist As Celebrity: Interrogating the Work of Tracey Emin and Sue Williams”. An article about female confessional and ‘victim’ art. www.shutitdown.net/text/victim.html

Events

An Evening Of Poetry And Film With Billy Childish Thursday 25 February 8.30pm

Billy Childish has had a long career as a poet, and has published over forty collections of verse. His poetry is by turn base, spiritual, funny and devastatingly honest, and for this event the artist will read a number of poems from across his career. The evening also features films by Childish, a less well-known aspect of his output. In 2002 the artist and a group of friends co-founded the Chatham Super 8 Cinema, which produces short films with a second-hand camera purchased at Rochester Flea Market, and the evening will include a number of their recent works.

→ Cinema 1 / £5 (£2.50 members)

Richard Birkett Thursday 11 March 7pm

The ICA’s Richard Birkett, who has co-curated the Childish exhibition, delivers a talk on the show. This talk will be signed in British Sign Language by Rob Chalk.

→ Lower Gallery / free

Billy Childish In Conversation With Matthew Higgs Thursday 18 March 7pm

Curator and artist Matthew Higgs has been a long-term supporter of Childish’s work, and has included him in exhibitions at venues such as Cubitt and the Hayward Gallery. Higgs is now the director of White Columns in New York, where an exhibition of Childish’s paintings is being mounted in parallel with the ICA show. For tonight’s event Higgs is in conversation with Childish, discussing the latter’s work as a painter and printmaker in the context of his wider, multi-disciplinary practice.

→ Nash room / £4 (£2 members)

Billy Childish And The Musicians Of The British Empire / The Vermin Poets / The Ken Ardley Playboys Thursday 8 April 7pm

Childish has been a unique and maverick figure on the music scene since the late 1970s, during which time his brand of garage-and-blues-infused punk rock has gained an international following and influenced many musicians. He has maintained an independent yet highly prolific approach to making-music, collaborating with others as well as performing solo under multiple guises and names. Tonight’s gig includes performances by two of his recent vehicles – the MBEs and The Vermin Poets – which feature Childish alongside Julie Hamper, Wolf Howard and Neil Palmer. Support comes from The Ken Ardley Playboys, a band that includes the artist Bob and Roberta Smith.

→ Theatre / £8 (£4 members)

Written by Student Teachers at the Institute of Education: Johanna Dresner, Joy Laing-Buisson and Ania Hardy with ICA Learning Interns Andrea Lorenzi and Benoit Loiseau.