



NIGEL CARRINGTON: CREATIVITY AS A MARKETABLE SKILL
JUPITER ARTLAND: CONTEMPORARY ART AND LEARNING
WHAT IS THE VALUE OF ART?
DRAWING IN FOCUS

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MASK: Education for Creativity

Alla Tkachuk MSc is a scientist by education who practises as a professional artist. Her work establishing a mobile art school and 'creative clubs' in Kenya has led to the training and advancement of young people in Kenya and beyond. She explains how her charity MASK has changed lives

Eight years ago I established a charity MASK (Mobile Art School in Kenya) that trains young people for creativity in Kenya. Arriving in Kenya to paint in 2006, I started to volunteer art activities in local communities, soon discovering that there is virtually no art education in schools, apparently because 'the value of the arts is not recognised'.¹

From the start I felt that the term 'art education' was confusing for my teachers and parents. They thought that MASK was training students to earn a living from art or that art education is an alternative for academically weak children. These views were often shared in the UK as I discovered when fundraising for MASK. We decided therefore to use term 'education for creativity' since it is *creativity*, the ability to *think* creatively, (not artistic creativity) that is the main skill that art education advances.

Creative thinking is visual thinking and ideas are images. Our visual processing mechanism is the key to our creativity and our ability to select and connect information. Most discoveries made by Nobel Prize scientists began as images.² Albert Einstein wrote that numbers and words were not important in his thinking but images were. According to the Centre for Mind and Brain³, changes in visual processing affect how we think and the process of making art and is most effective in developing our visual processing.

We are born creative in order to survive and adapt but creativity withers if not fostered. In *Breakpoint and Beyond: Mastering the Future Today* Beth Jarman and George Land share their research findings. In 1968, they tested a large group of children aged five. They found that 98 per cent displayed strong creativity but by the age of 15 only ten per cent of the same group, and only two per cent of adults aged 25 years and over, displayed the same characteristics of creativity. If the school system fails to nurture creativity young people will enter the workforce without this essential skill.

A leading industrialist, Dr Manu Chandaria CBE, said at a MASK event: 'Survival in the twenty-first century will be very difficult and without creativity it is not possible'.⁵

MASK

In our training we combine three methods that teach creativity:

- The *Making Objects* method is effective for younger students to learn about making connections (between knowledge, techniques and materials).
- The *Integration* method integrates making and creativity with other subjects such as peacebuilding.
- The *Direct Learning of Creative Thinking* method aims, through specific creative thinking techniques and strategies, to re-structure imagination, to develop visual and divergent thinking and an ability to make connections.

Since MASK was established we have many success stories. Joel Gatua, now 23, was on the MASK programme for five years. A confident young man, he now earns a living as an entrepreneur and is a leader in his community, valued by the elders for his 'good ideas'. He presented MASK's work at UNESCO IIEP⁶ in Paris. He said: 'Before MASK I did not know I was creative. MASK helped me to become an entrepreneur and to think outside the box. I love creative thinking.'

Hellen Gichuki, 23, is from the same class as Joel. She said: 'MASK helped me to develop the habit for innovating. While studying chemistry in college I designed a new drug which my college is now patenting. I found a job immediately after graduating and this is rare for Kenya. For my creativity I got promoted to a supervisory position only after four months. I am now in charge of an all-male team who have been in the company for years.'

MASK runs daily after-school clubs in five schools in Kenya. These include: Creative Club, Creativity for Entrepreneurship and Leadership clubs, and Peacebuilding Through Art programme.

Initially Creativity Clubs were called arts clubs but we wanted to move away from the vocational meaning of art education and use of art to imitate, and focus instead on nurturing resourcefulness. Students now make toys, collages, costumes and decorations out of recycled material which they often find around their home or school. Creating the unique from the everyday, they are encouraged to be imaginative and curious.

Creativity for Entrepreneurship and Creativity for Leadership clubs are new and evolved out of our creativity integration methodology. Linking creativity and business we wanted to show our students what creativity means in practice.

Creativity for Entrepreneurship clubs help students acquire knowledge and a mindset to enhance entrepreneurial thinking. They make connections between creativity/innovation and profit and competition, and through hands-on activities practise generating and evaluating ideas and value.

In the Creativity for Leadership Club students learn that people do not follow people but people follow ideas, and leaders are those who generate effective solutions to people's problems. Students identify problems in their schools and neighbourhoods and brainstorm effective solutions.

MASK PRIZE

Three years ago, at the suggestion of Kenyan teachers, we established an annual national creativity competition called the MASK PRIZE. It is not a usual art competition but is themed 'Young People - The Creative Nation'. Young people are invited to submit any media works on any subject that reflect ideas or solutions that can improve lives for people or the planet, or innovative methods in making art.

Seven prizes totalling £2,500 are awarded to young people and schools. With a leading Kenyan national newspaper as the competition's media partner, the MASK PRIZE is widely advertised. Thousands of young people and schools in Kenya and beyond have participated. The artworks

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have been exhibited at leading institutions around the world including the Nairobi National Museum, Saatchi Gallery and Library of Congress.

The prize is greatly appreciated by young people and teachers for 'building talent in Africa' and for 'spreading the value of art'. 'It was great to show my creativity and to encounter the creativity of others,' said Benson, 16. 'Even parents of my students are supportive of my art classes now,' said Esther, 30, a teacher from Darubini School. Ibrahim El-Salahi, one of Africa's leading artists, said at the opening of the MASK PRIZE at the Saatchi Gallery in 2014: 'Governments in Africa do not support art. The MASK PRIZE gives children their humanity back.'

A challenge

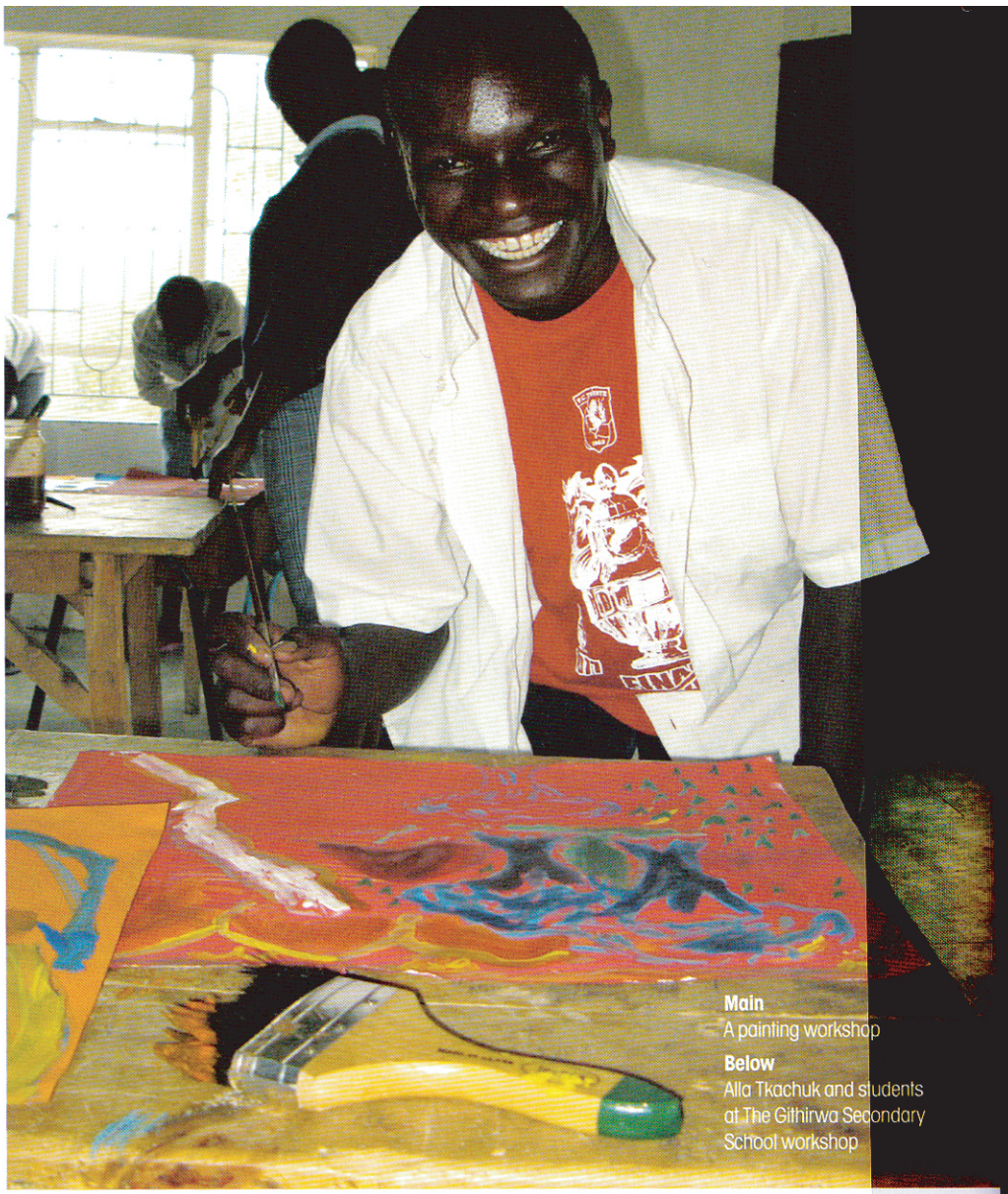
We worked together with SOAS and the Institute of Education on an 'Art Education in Kenya' seminar and recently spoke on creativity for development at UNESCO Forum in Seoul. It would be great to bring to our work the expertise of the National Society for Education in Art and Design. We invite art and design educators and researchers - primary to higher education - on 'sabbatical' to teach in our schools in Kenya and to help us in London to advance our work. ■

MASK is a UK registered charity (No. 1128734) mobileartschoolinkkenya.org

References

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3. University of California at Davis.
4. Beth Jarman and George Land, *Breakpoint and Beyond: Mastering the Future Today*, Harper and Harper Perennial, 1998.
5. MASK prize-giving event at Nairobi University, 2014.
6. International Institute of Educational Planning of UNESCO, Policy Forum 'Engaging Youth in Planning Education for Social Transformation', 2012.

Alla Tkachuk MSc, is a scientist by education who practises as a professional artist. Her work has featured in The Times (UK) and Bild (Germany). She led a series of seminars on innovation in portraiture at the National Portrait Gallery. She writes on art and creativity. alla@mobileartschoolinkkenya.org



Main
A painting workshop
Below
Alla Tkachuk and students at The Githirwa Secondary School workshop

