



The Cunningham Dax Collection  
The Dax Centre

## **The Dax Poetry Collection**

by Dr Jennifer Harrison

The Dax Centre invited me to establish The Dax Poetry Collection (TDPC) in 2011 as an important adjunct to the Cunningham Dax Collection of art works created by people with experience of mental illness. Together with editor and poet Jessica Raschke we envisaged a museum quality poetry database with perpetuity. Our goals were to collect together under ethical acquisition guidelines, aligned with the those of the Cunningham Dax Collection of visual art, poems that spoke of mental illness and/or psychological trauma. We wanted poems that addressed political poetics, personal poetics, aesthetic poetics, and educational poetics. We wanted strong poems that educated others about what mental unwellness means, poems that set up a dialogue with society about what is essential to the mental health of a culture. Stigma around mental health can only be addressed through meaningful discourse with society whereby misbeliefs and misconceptions can be challenged and new understandings encouraged.

The Dax Centre, situated in the Kenneth Meyer Building on the University of Melbourne campus in Parkville, has been part of the SANE Australia group since 2018. The Collection is overseen by a trust board (The Cunningham Dax Collection Trust Pty Ltd.) and managed presently by Curator and Collections Manager, artist Jonathan Crowther. The Dax Centre, managed by Stef Harris, is a Collection facility, a gallery space and a multifaceted not-for-profit organisation that explores the fascinating interface between art and the mind. More specifically, The Dax Centre's mission is to promote mental health and wellbeing by fostering a greater understanding of the mind, mental illness and trauma through art and creativity. The gallery's exhibitions change regularly and students frequently tour through the space with the aim of education towards mental wellbeing.

The Cunningham Dax Collection of visual art is housed at The Dax Centre and is one of only a few themed international collections of similar size and breadth. It consists of over 17, 000 works of art including a majority of two-dimensional works (paintings, drawings and collage) as well as sculpture, film, video, photography and other objects. Like other notable international collections, such as the Dr Ghislain Museum in Belgium and the Prinzhorn Collection in Germany, it originated and grew with the work of an eminent psychiatrist. Dr Cunningham Dax AO (1908-2008) was a British psychiatrist who migrated to Australia in 1951. Dr Elizabeth Dax AM continues the work of her father as the Chair of the Cunningham Dax Collection Trust.

Developing TDPC has been, and continues to be, volunteer work. Together with artist Nina Portail, and other volunteers over the years, most memorably Terri Dry, we have created a database of over 500 poems from 60 authors. We are currently closed to new submissions but have a waiting list of 30 authors keen to submit their poems – once we have administratively dealt with the submissions we have received. We do not approach poets. Poets who are comfortable with their work appearing in the

context of being part of the Cunningham Dax Collection approach us. We have an Advisory Board to oversee TDPC's mission, ethics and acquisitions. In the past we have presented a strong program of events at The Dax Centre including: 'Hope and Despair in the Poetry of Peter Porter and Sylvia Plath' with Petra White and Chris Wallace-Crabbe (2012); 'Fairytale and Fancy: The Mind of the Child in Poetry' with Doris Brett and Nick Bland (2013); 'Poets and Identity' with Mammad Aidani, Riwei Wilson, Elizabeth Campbell, Leanne Hall and Alex Skovron (2014) and 'Outsider Poetry' with Philip Salom, Justin Clemens and Petra White (2014).

The Dax Poetry Collection was launched in 2013 by Professor Paul Hetherington and Mal McKimmie with readings by members of the original performance group 'Loose Kangaroos', Sandy Jeffs and Geoff Prince. The name of the group originates from a poem by Sandy called 'A Thesaurus of Madness' which collects colloquial definitions of madness such as 'I have a kangaroo loose in the top paddock'.

In addition to events and readings, TDPC has hosted numerous book launches, for example: *Shaping the Fractured Self: Poetry of Chronic Illness and Pain* edited by Heather Taylor Johnson (2017); *Diary of a Schizophrenic: Second Edition* by Paul Fearn (2018) and *Writing on The Wall* by Anne M. Carson. This book was launched in collaboration with Antislavery Australia in 2017. We have co-curated or participated in exhibitions, most recently the exhibition of art and text *Finding Our Words* in 2019. The Dax Centre holds a growing library of poetry (many thanks to those who have donated books and especially to Peter Rose, editor of *Australian Book Review*, who regularly donates the poetry collections sent in for review).

In 2019 we hosted a memorial to the Melbourne poet Gudrun Hinze (1950-2019). This is what she had to say in her artist statement about her famous 'Ant Poems', which are held in the Collection: 'Despite intermittent bouts of insanity I remembered my son. The (Ant) poems were written for him, the child being father to the woman. He impelled me through life. Now a successful 45-year-old actor's agent to his mother's 68-year-old tenure on the planet. He receives an 'Ant Poem' for his birthday each year, 'Ant' because of its persistent, humble industry'. Gudrun told me shortly before her death that she felt most comfortable reading her poetry at The Dax Centre surrounded by other poets that she could relate to in so many diverse ways.

Dr Toby Davidson from Macquarie University, in 2011, edited the *Collected Poems* of the Australian poet Francis Webb (1925-1973) and noted that Webb spent many years institutionalised for a variety of diagnoses from 'persecution mania' to schizophrenia. He was one of the first poets of the postwar era to openly write about his experiences in mental hospitals in Australia and the UK. Webb himself referred to mental illness as 'that nameless knowledge in my soul'. Poetry also has nameless, sublime expressive qualities. The insights of poetry are often humorous, life affirming, dark and resilient. Poetry offers rebellion, refusal, irreverence, and has a unique ability to see behind doors previously closed (for example those locked doors of Chelmsford) and to articulate the individuality that lies between silence and language. As Mal McKimmie says in *The Brokenness Sonnets I-III & Other Poems* (2011), 'There is wind on the water, mist in the mirror / but something in me like a swimming child moves.'

Sandy Jeffs (OAM) has lived with schizophrenia for 47 years and among her many poetry collections, together with Margaret Leggatt, in 2020, co-authored the important book *Out of the Madhouse: From Asylums to Caring Community?* All Sandy's poetry is held in TDPC and I was privileged to launch her poetry collection *The Mad Poet's Tea Party* in Melbourne in 2015. Here, in entirety, is her poem 'Acrostic # 1: The S Factor':

Sometimes  
craziness creates a  
heightened  
illumination of the  
zeitgeist  
originality its

privilege  
humour its  
revenge  
every outsider  
nonconformist work of art is an  
ingenious  
act of lunacy

Sometimes Sandy's voice is personal, at other times political, or collectively inclusive. Here is the last stanza of the opening poem of the book, 'The Madwoman in This Poem':

The madwoman in this poem  
is everywoman  
is any woman  
is a mother, daughter  
sister, lover, friend –  
the madwoman in this poem –  
is me

As the American poet Lucia Perillo has said: 'Who doesn't have at least one pair of wax wings out in the garage?'

When writing is this direct, stigmatisation about madness cannot thrive because stigmatisation requires a sense of distance, of otherness, of being 'not me'. Everything about this poetry challenges preconceptions. Why do we choose labels such as madness, illness, mental health issues? Who uses them, who decides, and why? Who owns the lingo? As Sandy says, in her poem 'Super Madwoman':

... who, disguised as Sandy Jeffs ...

fight the never ending battle  
for lunacy, unreason  
And the subversive way!



## *Finding our words*

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THE DAX CENTRE  
Understanding mental health through art

Artist - Elizabeth Turnbull, Meditation 2008, acrylic on canvas,  
30.3 x 26cm, courtesy of the artist, © The artist

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This article first appeared in *Unusual Work* No 35, edited by Melbourne poet T.T.O., published in May 2023. The edition was launched at BLACKSPARK, Melbourne, on June 11<sup>th</sup> 2023.