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## Autonomy, the Critical Journal of Interdisciplinary Autism Studies

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### ART ... A POSITIVE NECESSITY OF LIFE

October 15, 2013

By Dr Dinah Murray

#### Abstract:

*This paper could be seen as a case study with a follow-up eighteen years on. But it is about a named person and, then and now, is written as co-participant observational narrative. Ferenc Virag is the autistic artist whose work and whose friendship with me are at its centre; we have known each other for two decades now. I describe a process in which we are both learning from each other and caring about each other, building a relationship based on common interests and mutual trust. The hierarchisation entailed in the process of psychological research is incompatible with friendship; so this cannot be a typical 'case study' without harming us both. The usual anonymisation is incompatible with Ferenc's recognition as an artist.*

\*

*The story I tell here uses a lengthy excerpt from, "An Autistic Friendship" (1995) along with more recent events and creations to show the artistic and technical development of autistic artist, Ferenc Virag, and the continuing development of the friendship between him and me.*

*In the early years I made dated notes, since then I cannot be so sure about what happened when – but I did acquire a series of digital cameras, used to take the illustrations that follow. It is notable that certain threads have persisted in his art, which I highlight in the story below.*

*In July 1994 an event is described in which I pose myself as the normal contrast to Ferenc's autistic self. What I did notice at the time but chose not to mention back then, was his obvious incredulity at the idea that I was normal. It took a while to sink in, that one good reason why he and I get on is our shared autistic natures.*

*The original paper was written to emphasise how this very obviously*

*autistic young man repeatedly contradicted assumptions about autism, being communicative, sensitive to my needs in the context of our friendship and my willingness to share and potentiate his interests, and above all, exploratory and creative when given the chance. All additions to the original are in italics.*

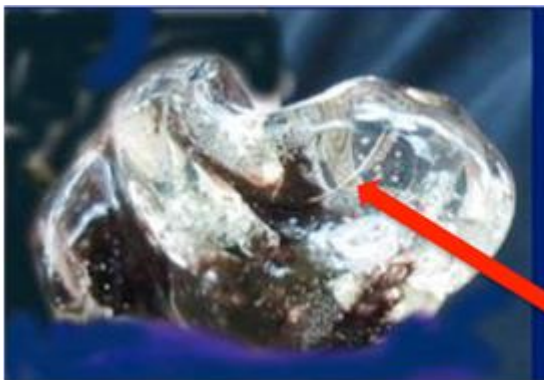
# Art ... a positive necessity of life

**By Dr Dinah Murray**

*Extract from 1995 paper starts here:*

I found someone whose interests I share in Ferenc. We both like nature, light, refraction and reflection, find beauty in them. We both like controlling material: making things, melting things,

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*2000. Ferenc took a clear plastic disposable tumbler and traced a line of blue biro ink squeezed thickly but smoothly out along the rim; then turned and turned it above our bonfire flames, creating a classic spiral shape as in millefiori Venetian glasswork*

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making sparks fly; we both relish the potential of computer graphics. When he is frustrated Ferenc sometimes injures himself quite badly, biting his thumb till it bleeds, gashing his forehead, etc.

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*2007 Ferenc has shown a persistent interest in teeth as art objects and has hand-crafted many sets. Teeth of every species interest him, including teeth in road kill. Their connection with the human face is shown in the arrangement here.*



He files his teeth, eats insects, and tests batteries with his tongue. He is an elective bilingual mute, recently [ie 1995] assessed as understanding up to four-word utterances. Though he will not speak he uses a wide range of Makaton signs, only some of which I understand.

Most of this paper is devoted to an anecdotal account of my relationship with him. I make no attempt to disguise his identity, because he is an artist - an animation virtuoso - and because he has given his consent to the publication of the anecdotes below.

## The Relationship

For the last three years [ie. since 1992], plus, I've been a fairly regular companion to Ferenc, sharing his interests, abetting them wherever possible, commenting on his actions in an encouraging sort of way, and paying them close attention. It is very evident that he likes all this - and he has become much more attuned to my concerns, much more interested in communicating with me as the years have passed. I believe a particular feature of our relationship has been substantially responsible for this: I have always behaved cotropically towards him. Cotropicality is relating to a person by letting their interests guide yours, in speech and deed.

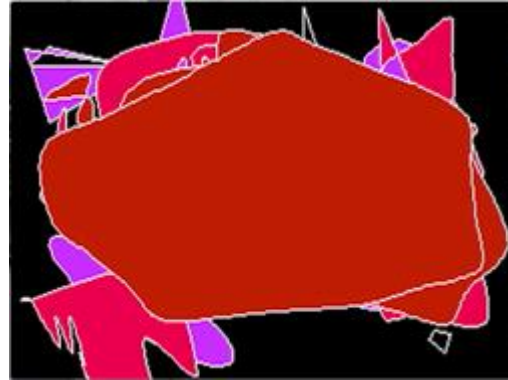
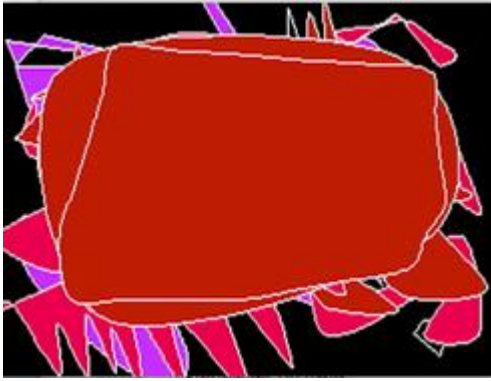
## Anecdotes

9/92: It is one of our regular Friday afternoons. Ferenc is being made to complete a project before having his free time with me. It is all done but the writing of his name, which he really does not want to do. He looks across at me, meets my eyes for a moment, and pushes paper and pencil across the table to me. I say, "I'm sorry, Ferenc, but I think I might get in trouble with Jo if I do it for you" (which was true). Immediately he takes the paper back and gets on with writing his name. Several times since then I've had to explain to him that I'll get in trouble of some kind or other if I go along with his wishes: he nearly always cooperates without further ado.

92/93 There is a photo up in the school hall of Ferenc being given a prize at the Chelsea Flower show for work in a local community garden. He takes me to the hall to show it to me.

5/93 I was joining Ferenc's class for an outing. Teaching staff were awaited, and late. The children had nothing to do, so a helper organised them all into doing something most of them quite enjoy, ie making some music with the odd instrument chosen from a crate. As so often, Ferenc is standing right back in a hope-not-to-be-noticed stance, his head slightly down, his limbs huddled. The helper rounds him up, he bites his thumb furiously and goes over as he's been told, and sits down. He looks across at me, gazing at him with I suppose a look of intense fellow feeling, since that was how I felt, and he smiles my first smile from him. And I smile back while he holds my gaze for a moment longer. The helper urges him to pick up an instrument and he picks a triangle without fuss, and - urged again - gives it a blow and stops. I say to him, "Maybe you can enjoy yourself?" and with a touch of a smile again, he starts to play. Early 94 Ferenc is using a soldering iron. He is waiting for a drop of solder to fall from its tip, but he is holding the iron horizontal. I say "If you reduce the surface area..." and before I can complete the sentence, Ferenc has tilted the iron to a vertical.

94. Ferenc proves to have a real flair for computer animation; we decide to record his work by dumping every screen he creates - including every movement of the cursor - straight on to video cassette. The first time, we successfully make two copies, one for him, one for us. Communications between him and Mike - my colleague whose contribution to this project has been central" - are excellent from the start, since Mike is concerned only to help him understand and control what's going on.



*1994. Two stills from 'Some abstract animations by a fast learner' (Youtube). Each layer was meticulously animated then almost hidden by the next layer; it plays on a loop*

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The second time, the technology isn't quite sorted: there is only one recording (when this time we had meant to make three - as we successfully do next).. I say, "Oh, Ferenc, would it be all right if I took this home with me and gave it back to you on Monday morning?" (the day after the morrow). He shakes his head vigorously. Feeling very vexed, I grit my teeth and leave the room. Meanwhile, as I learn later, Mike goes up to Ferenc, who is holding the successful cassette, and eyeballs him with, "Ferenc, you know Dinah really really wants it too...". The next moment, Ferenc finds me in the kitchen, clutching the cassette to him, he leans towards me, and makes an obviously strenuous attempt to extend the cassette in my direction. I say, "Oh, is it all right then, if I take it home...?" He shakes his head as vigorously as ever. I shrug, and tell him nevermind - resigned to never seeing it again.

Next time, we successfully (largely thanks to the help of Stuart Powell) set up a pair of recordings direct from the computer, plus an outside camcorder filming Ferenc himself, and our interactions with him. At the end of the session, when I offer him his cassette, he refuses it, indicating that it is mine. I am very touched, as I have been when earlier he has pushed across the table towards me, the last four Ferrero Rochers (until then I'd had just one).

7/94 We are travelling in my car together, a forty mile journey. Just as we are getting out of London a traffic jam forms, he bites his thumb, I grind my teeth and cuss. There's worse to come: at the next junction tape is stretched across the road, everyone is sent either left or right with no guidance and no explanation. Once again, we cuss in our different ways. I explain, as we crawl along with half the other lost cars, that we'll just have to take the next turning going the right way, and I show him the map and the road we've had to leave, with our destination clearly visible on it. From then on (without reading the map) until we rejoin the road, Ferenc is totally confident about direction, even when I'm hesitating, and is eagerly nudging me and pointing out impending junctions. With a little thumb-biting from him and a little tooth-gnashing from me, we both manage to keep our cool and get there in the end.

7/94 We are walking across a long lawn together; a cat steps out to join us, I stroke it for a moment, Ferenc reaches down and feels its tail briefly; we walk on accompanied by the cat. Unusually I break the silence with a thought I've often had, "Ferenc," I say, "I often think that ordinary people, people like me, are more like dogs, while people like you, people with autism, are more like cats" then I turn towards him and ask him if he knows what I mean. He nods firmly, then looks for a moment hesitant - suggesting to me that perhaps he felt he understood the cat analogy himself (they own a cat) but wasn't sure about other people and dogs.

8/94 Ferenc and I and my dog have joined a bunch of ramblers for a camping trip along Hadrian's Wall. There are no chairs and for thirty-six hours he won't sit down. Eventually solicitous persuasion by a number of people gets him going purposefully off to get the large wooden box which offers much the most luxurious seat in camp. He finds a space beside the fire and sits down with the rest of us. On previous nights his fascination with the fire - especially his desires to melt plastic in it, and to make sparks fly - has caused some tension. Ruth has cleverly twigged that if he is allowed to find a safe place to do it, he will be happy for hours on end striking glowing brands so they shoot sparks out into the blackness.

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2001. *Legitimate sparks fly:  
Ferenc loves sparklers as much as  
I do.*



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Tonight he is trying to compromise with the plastic-melting, and has enclosed tiny scraps in foil before putting them in the fire. Unfortunately even with this much care, they smell as they melt, and Ferenc finds himself being shouted at. After cricking his head furiously sideways (as though he could shake the din out, like water in the ear) he jabs a finger up his nose, producing a terrific instant gush of blood. At once the mood of opprobrium directed at him is transformed into sympathetic concern.

He and I go mushrooming, him having found a container for the purpose unprompted. When it is full, we hurry back, as we get closer, he pulls ahead, almost breaking into a run, and (again unprompted) he proffers them to the others.

For two nights he hardly lies down, gets no sleep. He won't enter the tent set up for him, he won't lie down in the one he's agreed to share with two others. On the third night we get him to help set up a tent close to mine and to lay out his sleeping bag in it. At around One am. Rain starts to fall, everyone heads for their tents. Ferenc stands between his and mine, immobile. I beg him to bend down and get in, I show him that it's nice in there, I point out that it's raining harder and harder, I urge him to just bend his knees, to let me take his shoes off, to think how tired he is. He is adamant. I say, "Ferenc, I'm exhausted, and I can't lie down until you do". He takes his shoes off and lies down. We are at an English Heritage Roman site. In some fine gravel with a narrow plank he has picked up, Ferenc very carefully inscribes a pattern, frequently standing back to look at the effect, and touching it up here and there. I admire what he has done, and say so. Later on, back at the camp site, he and I have walked down to take a look at the sunset view across the distant hills and clouds. He taps me in his urgent way, and makes a sweeping pointing gesture at this wonderful sight; I say, "Yes, it's amazing - light and shade." Then I add, "Hey, Ferenc, you know the picture you made earlier in the gravel?" he assents, "I thought that was all about light and shade?" and he gives me a most decisive nod.





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2012 & 2000 - 2010 Both these are hand-made by Ferenc (including the bricks); he is holding the light penetrated shape on the left; he thrust the camera close in to the house 'module' (see more below) to show its shady inside.

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10/ 94 Due to events beyond our control, it's our first Friday together for several weeks. I usually arrive in the school by soon after 1.15, today it's nearer half past before I dash breathlessly through the school gates. Sheilah and Bojena both let me know how impatiently I've been awaited. They'd pointed out to Ferenc that if he wanted to make sure I was coming, if he would just be willing to use speech, he could phone my home and check. He has, apparently, seriously considered this possibility. By the time I've learnt all this I'm in the Leavers' Room and he's on his feet, grinning all over his face, and out the door with me following him, going to the technology room. There he single-mindedly ignores everything but the (very safe, well-designed) electrical equipment on which he has been experimenting in my company since last term.

One of the most interesting things we've discovered together has been how to make a glowing 'element' which stays satisfactorily hot without tripping the safety mechanism and cutting out the current. Different lengths and types of wire have been explored along with variations of voltage, quite systematically. Another interesting thing we both enjoy is the way sparks fly when currents clash. One week when we are exploring these attributes, Ferenc lights up a whole sequence of tiny light bulbs with a circuit partly made out of a triangle from the music set.

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2011. *Electric creativity continues*



One week, he spends a lot of time drawing smouldering lines on a piece of wood. I point out to him that what he's made is using the same technique as is used in making a soldering iron hot. He looks across at me with a, That is extraordinarily interesting! Now I understand! expression.

12/94. It is the school holidays - three days before Christmas - I have promised Ferenc that we'll go back to Cardfields at last. When I pick him up (from his respite centre) he greets me with the sign C - very urgently - "Yes! we're going to Cardfields," I say, and a look of satisfaction spreads across his face. When we arrive, we are both struck at once by the new wooden walkway built out over the large pond. Ferenc wants to go on it at once, but comes without demur when I say we'd better say Hello to the residents and check that it's OK. After a quick visit to the dining room - where Ferenc is a bit agitated by the new table cloths (probably the first new ones in ten or fifteen years) - we go back to the frozen pond.

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Ca 2000.

*Encouraged to create an area of paving where he now lives. It is almost perfectly horizontal*



*Ca 2012. With access to CD cases as material, Ferenc has created this near perfectly rectangular block out of many angled broken bits*

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For two and a half hours we break off the largest pieces of ice we can. Ferenc very quickly develops an excellent technique for the purpose: he finds a long stick and uses it to press down on the ice as far out as he can reach, soon a crack develops and I manoeuvre the latest piece out of the water. Each one is broken into small pieces by one method or another - careful scraping, assiduous hacking, throwing, and eventually (though still not exclusively) by bringing them down on the top of his head. He pings several of the ice sheets, inviting me to hear them, holds them up to the sun and looks at the light through them, bounces small shards along what ice remains, finally whirls every worthwhile piece left into the air, where they almost seem to float as they spin.

After that, at my request, he takes me to the place in the field where, months previously he had neatly trampled out a corn line. I've asked him if he remembers where the sun was when he made the line, and he has nodded decisively. As I'd tentatively guessed, the line pointed at where the sun had been, "So, you made the line point at the sun?" - another decisive Yes. When I look at the photo of his line, later on, I realise that its slight deviation from straightness is a function of the sun's small movement across the sky while he carefully trampled it out.





2002. Ferenc was encouraged by Disabilities Trust staff to help construct this shed, and decorate its back. Different coloured spotlights are angled on it at his behest.

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Late 94. Ferenc and I go off to look at the glass at the Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington. At Archway, Ferenc takes me to the place on the platform where you can look down the tunnel, curving off into the darkness. He gestures at it, making sure that I am sharing his attention, that I am focussed on the same object of interest. We gaze for a moment, then walk back down the platform. Now he points eagerly down between the lines to where the rodents scurry busily about, polishing off all edible litter, "Oh yes," I say, then add, "they're careful not to touch the electric rail". At the Museum, we're a bit disappointed with the glass display: it's far too cluttered, nothing has a chance to be looked at properly. Ferenc clearly finds it too much, and we both repair rather soon to the restaurant downstairs. There he queues up in a perfectly orderly way, only spoiling the appearance of normality when he sniffs the pastries.

I get him a pastry, with a helping of cream, and a fizzy drink; I have a pot of tea. By the time I'm ready for my first sip of tea, he has polished off everything and is asking for more. I look at my money and say, "Will you go and get it, if I give you the money?" and he shakes his head firmly. So I say, "Well, then I'm afraid you'll have to do without, because I want to just sit here and drink my tea." He gets to his feet, takes enough money for another pastry, and goes over to the counter to pick one up - actually, to pick two up, which caused me to intervene briefly. Then he takes it over to the till, shows it to the cashier, hands over the money, waits for the change, and comes back to the table with the pastry. He had only once done such a thing before, and that under great pressure with nagging at every step, I tell him, "Well done," add, "There's all sorts of things you could do, you know, Ferenc?" but don't get an answer to that.

Next we cross the road to the Science Museum, which also has a gallery devoted to glass and glass-making. We find it altogether more satisfying than its arty neighbour's. At Ferenc's insistence, we watch right through the scratchy looped video, dated 1979, of the process of glass-making in a foundry. On the way back, we are waiting for the pedestrian light to come on at a crossing near the school. A stranger asks me a question, and I don't notice when the green man finally lights up. But Ferenc does, and nudges me anxiously. His general appearance when crossing roads is always of enclosed unawareness of the scene around. After this, when we are out together I sometimes point out to him how much freer he could be if he would learn to cope with crossing roads.

Christmas 1994 I bring Ferenc to my home to show him our superbly decorated, very tall tree. He glances at it extremely briefly, then averts his eyes, "Is it too much?" I ask - "Yes!" he nods decisively.

Late Jan 95 I have found a local glassworks, where they are willing for us to visit one Thursday afternoon. As we approach it, I tell him that it's likely he won't be able actually to do anything, though it's just possible he will. He seems to take this in.

We step into a large room with furnaces, kilns, and strange implements in it. Ferenc is longing to explore everything; I say, "I'm sorry, we're just going to have to wait until there's someone here to tell us what we can touch". He just about brings himself to refrain from then on, but the minutes do drag by. Eventually I call up some stairs and a kindly admin person - probably she with whom I'd arranged the visit - comes down and starts explaining things to us. Ferenc listens intently to everything she says, looking at the objects whose uses she is describing. He has spotted a stack of carefully ordered and labelled, coloured glass pieces, and he takes her over to those to have them explained.

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*2009/10. Ferenc's interest in melting and reshaping blends with his interest in teeth.*

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He also wants to have one, but I tell him they're part of the process, and not hers to give. In another room wheels for glass-polishing/grinding are spinning round, while an artisan shapes a stopper on one of them, which Ferenc watches intently. When she stops, he seizes one of the many plain glass stoppers awaiting their finishing touches, and is allowed to set it against the turning file. He holds it with his usual steady hand, purposefully and smoothly making it into an almost perfectly rectangular squared-off section at each end.

The news comes through that the afternoon's glassworking had commenced in the foundry, and Ferenc stops his filing without too much reluctance. For the next hour and a half, we watch the team of three perform their subtle glass-heating dance, which culminates in a great coloured bubble being squeezed into a mould. Ferenc manages to stay out of people's way whilst staying close to the processes they're engaged in. When he's told that he's not going to be able to work on any softened glass himself, he takes it very well. But he acts like lightning when an opportunity comes to do things to a small piece of still molten glass that gets dumped. He spots a piece of broken brick and presses it carefully down in time to impress the cooling blob.

Early March 1995

There has been a light fall of snow, which has settled outside the London basin of warmer air. The Leavers' Class is going to St Alban's for the day, to find the snow. When we get there, before us is a great expanse of untouched white. Almost at once, Ferenc begins rolling a snowball along until it's too big to roll. He then goes off about twenty feet and starts to roll another ball towards the first. That gets packed into place while I get some more. The others go off to see sites while we keep building. It is evidently not to be a snow person; once sufficient mass is in place, Ferenc starts to shape a four-cornered structure, with flat, slightly sloping sides. I keep the supplies of snow coming in, and find a long straight stick I think might be useful. At once, Ferenc uses the stick in a wide sweeping motion to flatten off the sides. Our time is limited and we work solidly without a break for nearly an hour and a half. When time runs out, the structure is complete. It is a solid plinth of packed snow about four by four feet at its base, about three foot high and three by three on top. We get the others to take a look; Ferenc briefly climbs up onto it (it easily bears his weight). His pride in his achievement is palpable.

March 1995

At School Assembly, I show Harborough the film Mike Lesser and I have made with Ferenc: all of our names Copyright on the title page. Ferenc (who was not particularly interested when I played it through for him soon after we'd made it) watches it all with great intensity, and rushes over to me as soon as it ends, making the Makaton sign for "more". There had been no indication from him in all those months, that he was currently aware of ever having had a good time doing animation. I promise him to write to his parents to fix seeing him at the coming weekend. So, five days later I pick him up in Hackney and bring him back to my place. We head straight upstairs to the computer. After a little help from my son, we have the animation program running, and I leave Ferenc on his own with the computer, while I Hoover the stairs. When I go in, after about half an hour, he has written a thirty-two frame abstract animation with flying discs and lines hurtling in and out of each other. I congratulate him and make sure it is saved, then go on with the housework. Next time I go in, I find he has integrated his short film with my son Fergus's steadily revolving mathematically derived animation, and added to his own some clear references to Fergus's independently generated sequence.

When I read out the anecdotes above to Ferenc, I apologised for it, and explained that I needed him to listen and see if he remembered what I remembered. I also explained that I needed to know if it was all right if other people read it. He seemed keen to hear, and attended closely ...Throughout, I stuck fairly closely to my text, simplifying only occasionally, getting regular nods to my memory checks. About halfway through, I asked him is he was just nodding because it was easier. He shook his head. When asked if he knew what it meant, he signalled decisively that he understood "compromise".

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### ***From 1995-2013***



*Concerns with fragmentation and order intersected with the major event of Ferenc's home being demolished – a process that started around 1997, when he produced the leather tooling above on a school trip to the Cordwainers' College in London. It was his first chance to work leather and his first meeting with the tools needed. Once he knew what he was doing he created a depiction of an exploding world – he confirms that **is** a detonator, see the detail on the right.*



*Left is a picture from the 1960s of the part of the Holly St Estate known as The Snake, where Ferenc lived, it is clearly referenced in the leather engraving above; and this layered block (2011) also echoes it in some ways, as do the modules below*



*2006-2012 Ferenc made each of these out of tiny hand-made bricks, without using measurements; they are closely uniform in size. He is in accord with the idea that they relate to the now demolished estate. Not much light gets in.*

*Ferenc's family was re-housed and then a placement was found for him in a flagship residential autism provision where it was hoped he would be able to follow his creative pursuits as they offered carpentry, jewellery making and metal work. Unfortunately within a few months of arriving there, he broke a window in the office in response to confusion and mixed messages about a possible visit from his family (now far away). From then on, Ferenc was deemed to be someone who couldn't be trusted near sharp things and his participation in all those activities was curtailed.*

*The placement broke down within a year, and Ferenc moved to a place with the Disabilities Trust, nearer home and with real sensitivity to his needs, as he regularly affirms when I see him. He used to draw a sketch map of Britain every time I saw him, with his first placement marked on it, with where he now lives also marked – he would give place No 1 a vigorous thumbs down and agree strongly when I said how much better things seemed to be where he is now. Then one day (in 2007?) he heard an item on the radio about a place in Cornwall where the staff had stolen from their 'service users' and physically abused them. After that Ferenc added them to the map, and now regularly points out that place No 1 was a lot better than the horror place in Cornwall, where really really bad things happened.*

*Since I took him to see an enameller at work, in about 2004, Ferenc also typically draws an enamelling kiln each time – which I am to make sure the management knows he needs.*

*2013. After years of haphazard access to ceramics, Ferenc is promised a purpose made zone for a kiln.*

*Another demolition of his home has now happened: this time the Edwardian pile – where he and several other people had lived at too close quarters for autistic comfort – has been replaced by individual purpose-built dwellings, giving everyone a much higher degree of autonomy and the possibility of avoiding much distress. Somewhere, there will be room for a kiln.*





*It's not obvious that these apparently abstract works (left 2007, right 2012) have any bearing on the issues Ferenc has had about home. Yet there is a clear continuity with the late – unfragmented - 2012 image below left, which represents the ground plan of the twinned bungalows Ferenc was about to move into, with great satisfaction, in early 2013.*



*Before the move, both of these were on display on his bedroom wall along with the pair of matched 'abstract' patterns above.*

\*

*As I did in 1995, I asked Ferenc to confirm my interpretations in this paper, and he is happy to have the article shared. He strongly assented to the idea that questions of darkness and light have always been very important to him, and that the Holly Street estate was a dark place; mainly he was impatient with going over his old art at-all. I apologised for the rather poor quality pictures, he seemed indifferent. I asked him if he wanted a camera, he said, No; I pointed out he could photograph his work himself, he still said, No.*

*What have I learnt?*

*I had an idea about the role of highly focussed interest in autism (see Murray, Lesser and Lawson, 2005; Lawson, 2011; Milton 2012) and that's why I met Ferenc in the first place. Bert Furze (now MBE), the head of the local autism school, said "Yes you can come and be nosey about autism in my school but only if you come regularly and make friends with one of the pupils". So that helped me on the right path even though my motive was investigation, with its Us and Them potential.*

*Engaging with his interests guaranteed engaging with Ferenc as a person rather than as an object. Interests are at the core of human connection, both mentally and socially.*

*When considering human beings, it is more rewarding, more open, more constructive and more informative to explore the possible than the typical.*

*Ferenc, who is so classically autistic, always in 'special' provision, always in the purview of the authorities, is a passionate human being who has forged an autonomous path by means of recurrent creative acts – and a little help from his friends.*

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### Thanks

*Many thanks to everyone already mentioned above who helped make this story possible. The Disability Trust centre where Ferenc lives has provided a lot of excellent support: in particular, Ferenc rates Joe Kingsley highly for standing up for him and his passions over many years, and Linda Dejager for recognising so well the materials and opportunities he needed for his art, and making sure he got them.*

*Thanks also to Larry Arnold for encouraging me to undertake the expansion here, and for helping me think of this title.*

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