

## **Talk - Exeter Arts & Therapy Conference 23.3.2002**

Sometimes, the wider society needs attention, as well as the individual or family. Can art therapy draw on models of new genre public art and social activism? This brings potential for new ways of working with communities, and reaffirms art therapists as artists.

A look at artists whose work is based on a model of caring - the sculptor Bradley McCallum's work with the homeless, Suzanne Lacy's piece, The Crystal Quilt, featuring the experiences of older women in society- and also at art therapists in America who are working with models of social action and compassionate activism.

## **Re-enchantment of Art Therapy.**

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While working in mental health, I have sometimes found it quite hard to hold on to being an art therapist and using art to help people. I sometimes felt as if I needed the skills of a nurse or a social worker, as well as a psychotherapist, and that those skills were sometimes valued more than the very unique art ones I bring. It was sometimes hard to realise my sense of what art therapy could be, which left me feeling dis-encharnted.

At the same time, I also felt disencharnted with art. Art is one of my ways of recharging myself, yet I found often contemporary art exhibitions alienating, and I did not find the inspiration/uplift I sought. I began having conversations with other people, including artists and found that they felt the same. Sometimes, people I worked with, as staff or clients would go up to the Tate Modern, and come back and be outraged at something they'd seen, and tell me about it, as if as the 'art' person, as if I'd been personally responsible for it. I wouldn't always know how to respond. Obviously, artworks have a role as 'anxious' objects, as art critic Harold Rosenberg (cited by Gablik) puts it and to challenge, make us question our perceptions and so on. And it needs to evolve and break new ground. But in terms of finding my own sense of resources and relationships, and what supports that, there was something missing. Thinking of Matisses' desire to create an art like a comfortable arm-chair, I felt as if I was around too many anxious objects and not enough armchairs. Re-encharntment and Remodernism Then I discovered the work of Suzy Gablik, which many of you will know, who calls for a Re-encharntment of Art, then I also came across a group of artists, called the Stuckists, who call for Remodernism in art, and I think that both these movements are interesting for art therapists.

Both call for a sense of the spiritual (which is very broad), valuing universal human creativity, and a sense of connectedness between people, and to the earth and society. I will look at 3 artists working this way. I had previously felt that there were models in art that could well be adapted to art therapy - Judy Chicago's installation, *The Dinner Party*, for example, which addressed the absence of recognition of women's work in history with a plate commemorating women's achievements as writers, artists. This could be adapted in a very simple form - maybe working with paper plates, to celebrate participants in a group.

In Gablik's book, *The Re-enchantment of Art*, I came across artists who were interested in doing work directly with their society or community as artists. They were interested in doing socially relevant work through art, rather than becoming a helping professional.

One of these is Bradley McCallum who is a sculptor who started out working with welded steel. He became drawn to the social purposes that he felt art had in societies, and to working with homeless people. Instead of going to work directly for homeless projects, he found a way of using his skills. He knew of the carts made by Krzysztof Wodiczko, which exist as artworks, and he wanted to make carts that could really be used. This work led to close collaboration with individual homeless people and ultimately to Brad McCallum founding the Collaborative Urban Sculpture Project, to develop this work to include participation by the homeless people also in building the carts.

I also learned of Suzanne Lacy, artist and social activist, and her work *The Crystal Quilt*. This was a huge installation in the Crystal Court of the Philip Johnson IDS Centre in downtown Minneapolis, which I'm told is would be a very large glass corporate building and it would have been quite powerful to have an art event there. This was a performance piece with 600 older female citizens in Minneapolis on Mothers day 1986.

It collaborated with several service agencies, Minnesota Board of Ageing, and educational institutions interested in promoting authentic images of women as active participants in the public sphere. For this piece the women entered the space, dressed in black, and seated themselves in groups of 4, at tables also covered in black. The performance consisted of them rearranging their hands in unison and slowly folding back the black table cloths, revealing Miriam Shapiro's red and yellow geometric patterns underneath. The actions, the form and the symmetry evokes quilt-making. While doing this, they conversed: discussing their hopes and fears, accomplishments and disappointments. Tape recordings of some of the conversations were projected up to the balconies to the audience. When it was over, the audience were invited to present the women with hand-painted scarves, placing them on the women's shoulders, as if at a public investiture. Suzanne Lacy dedicated the piece to her mother and wanted "to

empower participants, to raise consciousness about certain shared conditions of being female". She evaluated its success by whether the women continued to network and they did, some getting involved in education and training themselves, and so it clearly worked as a "social" project. Yet it was done with great artistry, and clearly works as a performance piece of art, so that it sits in the art world. This seemed like art that had so much connection with art therapy.

Dominic Mazeaud is another artist whose work intrigued me. From September 1987, she took it on herself to clear the Rio Grande river in New Mexico, which was polluted and full of waste and rubbish, and made a ritual artwork of doing this, *The Great Cleansing of the Rio Grande River*, keeping journals of the process. She did this on the seventh day of each month "like a devotee doing rosaries". She says that "all rivers are connected...People function in the same way.

One way to activate these currents is through ritual. Rituals are icons of connectedness, they are the art of our lives." (cited in Lacy 1995, 263) .

Again, there seemed a connection with art therapists' work of making a space where people can make their own rituals and connect with the benefits of ritual activity. So this was happening in the sphere of art, and in the wider society, - artists were drawing on social concerns to make art, because they wanted to practise art, yet that they were working in the territory art therapists are really familiar with. I was interested in artists who worked from that domain, but weren't interested in training as art therapists, even though they were interested in art therapy. Yet, for many artists working with people, particularly disadvantaged people, there are issues that arise that art therapists are very well equipped to deal with, or advise on - boundaries, sensitivity of art materials or practice to the individual, confidentiality, containment, ethical issues - and unlike artists, there is a professional body for support and an ethical code. It felt as if there was more to art and healing than Art Therapy and that there was more to Art than Fine Art.

## Where art therapists come in

It seemed to me that one (of many) things art therapists do really well is hold and support a consistent space for people to make art, even at their most fragile, as Chris Wood illustrates in her piece, *The Significance of Studios*, in *Inscape*. Chris Lyle has described how art therapists can hold groups that peter out if non-artistic professionals run them and I have had experience of this.

It concerns me that now there is money available to fund many art-based projects, which is all to the good, but it's not very often that art therapists are involved. Obviously, a notable exception is the work of Douglas Gill and Claire

Manson in their pioneering work in setting up Studio Upstairs, in London and Bristol. Another example is the Hands on Community Art Studio in New Mexico, which has artists and art therapists working together. But they are rare and where they might go.

I wonder if it might be a time when art therapists might think more in terms of setting up arts projects. We've taken a lot of models from psychotherapy. Maybe a model from arts practice can be applying for funding to do certain work? Could (or does?) this also include - or be informed by - aspects of 'new genre public art'? Lacy's term (cited by Miles, 1997 :8) describes a form that together with 'political imagination', 'acts as a catalyst for other peoples creativity'. Might this bring the potential to address significant social issues in peoples lives and an arena in which to do something about them?

Maybe skills that artists acquire - like funding, sponsorship - might help, particularly when there often is funding allocated to areas of concern (social exclusion, etc). Given also Malcolm Learmonth's talk at BAAT 2001, about the development of Arts for Health, is it not valid for art therapists, who are so skilled in working with people and communities, to identify specific social projects and work with them in society?

This could open up whole new ways of working. Can art therapists offer their work to society more publicly, as artists do? Can one stretch ones boundaries and at what point do you become a "community artist" rather than an art therapist? Yet this title is too limited, especially if you are qualified as both. I used to think it was a matter of just working separately as an "art therapist" in one area and an "artist" in another, but now I feel they can combine. There has been discussion about being an art therapist/an art psychotherapist - what about a "social art therapist"? or a " new genre public art therapist"? or simply artist and art therapist ?

Some models of art therapists working this way, 'Last year, (2001) I was fortunately able to go to the American Art Therapy Association's annual conference, which was held in Albuquerque, New Mexico. My visit was partly funded by South West Arts, and it felt very positive to have got funding from an arts body for an art therapy event.

There I heard American art therapists presenting work that also cited Gablik and Lacy, drawing on models of 'social action' and 'compassionate activism' (Kumar, cited by Gablik, 1995:141). The first was a presentation specifically on "Art Therapy as Social Action". This is a community arts installation project, by Rachel O'Rourke, and sponsored by the Illinois Art Therapy Association. Traditionally, art therapists have worked with the individual psyche, or at most the family or the group, in a closed setting where any artwork was only seen, or witnessed, by the

maker(s) and the therapist. This project arose from her work with victims of gun violence in Chicago, where she said that treating only the victims felt like "helping them adjust to a sick society". She has looked to art therapists who have been "drawing from their insights as artists and clinicians, offering new ways to address social issues in communities" and notes that "inclusiveness and fair representation are core issues of the current re-examination and redefinition of the artist in society", and advocates a "wedding of art therapy to social action, art education and the art world". Launched through community centres, schools, colleges and initially via e-mail, the project consisted of a paper person: participants were invited to use art materials to express their feeling about the issue of guns and gun violence. Guidelines for the project were included, particularly for those under 18, and permission forms for use of the artwork.

Over 2,000 Paper People were received back and the number is growing. These have been exhibited as an installation. Paper people were pegged on lines, and viewers could also make their own paper person and there was debate. (Also people available to talk to as the content addresses such an emotive issue) The project continues over the internet. Like Lacey's, it has linked with other organisations, connecting with the Million Mom March against gun violence in Chicago. Michael Franklin presented a performance piece "Compassionate Activism: A Continuing Artistic Exchange", distributing a box of found art materials to conference participants, as a welcome and to encourage art-making to "nourish our creative spirit", citing Satish Kumar's term: "Compassionate activism" - "not political activism in the sense of demonstrations in the street, but an activism where the artist is engaging actively with, or intervening in, particular situations, and using his or her creativity to create a space for some kind of healing to occur." Finally a public exhibition in Albuquerque by the Working Classrooms project, where artists work in studios with young people, Los Mueortos (The Day of the Dead), combined the traditional Day of the Dead art forms with addressing the contemporary events of September 11th.

All these works show the potential for a fusion of art, social activism and art therapy in the realm of new genre public art.

Michael Franklin cites four factors of new genre public art and activist art :-

"the performance takes place in a public site (Felshin 1995) is directly relevant to the lives of audience members (Lacy 1995) considers community involvement to be central to meaning-making (Jacob 1995; Phillips 1995) and makes use of ordinary structures... in a way that subverts their usual intentions (Felshin 1995)."

## Why social activism?

One finding of therapy can be that peoples' problems are not totally to do with them, but are influenced by all sorts of social conditions, housing, income, gender, culture - outside them or their control. In a culture where taking individual responsibility is the focus, and one works hard on what one can change, one of the most helpful things you ever hear is that it is not your fault. Some problems are not to do with the individual, but society. Is it not then appropriate to work with that society? Maybe another thing is to discover how much power you might have to do something about those things.

Often the work in therapy clarifies and resolution comes from taking action in real life. In one day centre I worked in, and cuts in social services that threatened all the therapy input: drama therapy, 2 art therapists. Someone I had worked with found these cuts so unacceptable that they launched a petition, which was strongly supported by other members in the centre and wrote to managers. I always felt that that action was as important as the therapy. (Which was re-instated). When I worked there, I focussed on individual work, and open and closed groups, which was fine, but I feel now that I often overlooked 'social' and 'creative' gains in pursuit of psychotherapeutic gains, and that sometimes just holding a group that motivated itself to get up, come out and join the group was enough. The low-key open art therapy group ran in the afternoon, where I least felt that what I was doing was art therapy was always well-attended, yet I often felt as if an art therapist might not be someone who took people out to art exhibitions, helped people choose art for the new building, taught some technical skills like print-making, all of which engaged a population, with chronic mental health difficulties, where daily life can be so hard to get through. Yet when I left, after many years it was taken over by a non-artist staff member as an 'art group' and soon ran down. My understanding now of would help me value making this kind of space as a valid therapeutic social intervention, countering social exclusion, as well as of value to the individual.

I also became interested in the exhibiting of art. Art therapy work is mostly, appropriately, private, but the sharing of more public art-making offers social gain: self-esteem and confidence,, which makes me feel that just some-times it is appropriate for art therapists to take certain work into a more public space, for the more social ends of recognition and connectedness.

## Making things special

Ellen Dissanayake is an anthropologist who sees art-making as an innate biological function that only humans have, the only other creature being the bower-bird, and that in all societies art-making has existed, in a very simply everyday sort of way, maybe within rituals, as part of life. Dissanayake sees it as

a drive to "make things special". Satish Kumar describes art-making in India being part of everyday life, not as something to be put on walls. Can the work of an art therapist be to keep, and honour, this aspect in ordinary life - not only in the sphere of healing, but as keeping well? art making being as accessible as baking a cake, a thing you do as part of everyday life, to feed the soul. Also to remind people they're creative. This is a subtle, yet pervasive, form of social action, which can serve - and enrich - a community.

While not everything I have been doing might seem like art therapy, my own practice is enriched by art and art therapy, so I hope that there is something for art therapists here.

I am finding a new way of being an artist and art therapist in a community. I continue my own art work, inspired by the Remodernism movement, exhibit and co-ordinate exhibitions. I am also working towards offering projects in the community, which are creative, social and therapeutic, in the spirit of 'new genre public art', where I feel art therapy has a place and a contribution.

To finish...

Some words from The Stuckists, that relate to the work of the artists and art therapists that I have been looking at and to my own art:

"Creativity is the most essential ingredient for a happy and healthy society and differentiates the human soul from that of a potato."

"Why do we need a new spirituality in art? Because connecting in a meaningful way is what makes people happy. Being understood and understanding each other makes life enjoyable and worth living."

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I am writing my dissertation on the area of Art Therapy and Social Action/Activism, I would be really interested in hearing from other art therapists about these ideas and work that they may be doing.

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## Biography

Graduated from the University of Hertfordshire in 1991: ten years as an art therapist in adult mental health, including:

Open-studio setting at the former Hollymoor Hospital, Birmingham.  
Community art therapist for Avon and Western Wiltshire Area Health Care Trust.  
Social Services Day Centres, Cheltenham and Gloucester.  
Studio Upstairs, Bristol.

Studying for an M.A. in The Arts in Society, University of Gloucestershire. Valued the opportunity to exhibit with fellow art therapists in Bristol, in 1999, and plan to again in 2003. In April/May 2001, was artist-in-residence in New Zealand, recent work with the Arts Co-ordinator at East Gloucestershire NHS Trust, on art-making projects for staff. I am interested in open-studio settings, and in promoting engagement with art as an everyday process that nurtures the soul.

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