

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Shaking, and making, the ground on which art therapy stands.

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Abstract

In this paper, Sheridan proposes that, although art therapy is not grounded in a clear and singular body of theory, neither is art therapy 'groundless'. She draws on the work of poststructurally oriented philosophers to suggest that art therapy, its subjects (including art therapists themselves) and its truths are continually being made and re-made within relations of knowledge and power. Art therapy can be understood as an embodied, discursive and relational practice in which subject and object, and (as the new materialism suggests) matter and meaning, are always already entangled. This perception moves an exploration of the relationship between the theories, practices and politics of art therapy into an explicitly ethical dimension.

Key words: art psychotherapy, narrative therapy, poststructuralism, poetry, contemporary art.

Anish Kapoor at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, February 2013

(For Bronwyn Daviesⁱ)

All sensation is composed with the void in compositing itself with itself, and everything holds together on earth and in the air, and preserves the void, is preserved in the void by preserving itself.

Gilles Deleuze, What is Philosophy?

Outside the MCA at dusk

the sky mirror is empty and flat

as a depression.

From an extreme angle we catch

a flicker of skyscraper blue.

Inside, I am sliced into red by the almost invisible

motion of steel.

I lured my friend into this machine that carves history

out of our flesh.

Skirting around

a universe being born,

I wonder what to make

of a long rectangle of indigo blue. I don't even know at first

That I'm on the edge

of a void.

Only my reluctant attentiveness,

the effort to be still and the impossibility of doing so,

allow me to see nothing.

I am split into infinity by giant prisms

shattered bent distorted joined separated repeated endlessly abstracted.

A suited man thins on the margins

of my silvery fatness.

More and more mirrors

implicate us in the making of what we see.

There's no sign here. Only the discipline

of not touching

the slight swelling

of a pregnant white wall.

A rusting hulk pushes out the gallery walls.

Memory is hard to get around.

It clangs and echoes

smells like an old iron bunker

is bigger and scarier on the inside.

Sunday driving over the Bridge

there's a southerly change

and almost too late

I look for the sky mirror

white clouds rolling fast across a pale disc of greying blue

I roll down the window yelling *now I can see it I can see the sky*

While art therapy is not, in my view, grounded in a clear and singular vision or body of theory, neither is art therapy 'groundless'. Provisionally we need to stand somewhere and to be informed, and yet it seems to me that we cannot claim to know for sure about either the antecedents or the current constitution of what might be designated - and one might then ask, by whom? - as 'art therapy'. Such truth claims are necessarily exclusionary - based on a sovereignty that refuses to acknowledge how, as Edward Said has said, "[t]he unknown remains with us to haunt us from its horizon even after we have consciously begun (Said 1975, p. 78)." Even the word 'we' is perilous - a shifting signifier and performative statement that denotes a community of art therapists, while inevitably reproducing some of the exclusions that 'we' seek to challenge - although I use it for want of an alternative that is not too self-centred on the one hand or too removed on the other.

Art therapy might be understood as an embodied, discursive and relational practice in which subject and object, and (as the new materialism suggests) matter and meaning, are always already entangled (Barad 2007; Dolphijn & van der Tuin 2012). Its subjectsⁱⁱ (including art therapy participants and art therapists themselves) and its truths - its ground - are continually being made and re-made within relations of knowledge and power. This perception, by denying the possibility of an essential or even a smoothly negotiated truth, moves an exploration of the relationship between the theories, practices and politics of art therapy into a profoundly ethical dimension.

In trying to understand how art therapy can be imagined and performed beyond the set of hierarchical binaries that so often divide it - and at times divide us from each other and even from our selves - I have turned toward the work of poststructurally oriented philosophersⁱⁱⁱ, particularly Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida^{iv} and more recently Karen Barad (2007). I have also been influenced by many arts therapists, including a few whose work is in a similarly 'deconstructive' vein to my own (e.g. Skaife 2008; Tipple 2003, 2012). The work of contemporary artists such as Anish Kapoor and, above all, my collaborations with art therapy participants, similarly expand and critique the boundaries of art therapy. I think that, at their best, theory, art and psychotherapy can break down binaries, including the divisions and hierarchies within and between theory, art and therapy. By making visible what was previously invisible, they enable us to see freshly, to see how I am - 'I' is - implicated in the making of what we see. They draw each of us as an embodied subject into the mutual constitution of matter and meaning, or, as Butler (1993) and Barad (2003, 2007) would say, into what 'matters'.

My Red Homeland (Kapoor 2003) suggests to me that the making of the ground on which we stand is often a bloody business. This resonates profoundly in the context of Australia, where the first peoples of the land were subjected to genocide and the systematic stealing of their children, suffer more ill health and die much younger than

non Indigenous Australians and are radically over-represented in almost all of the categories of distress that bring people to therapy. It is essential, living as I do in a place that was declared by the invaders, my ancestors, to be terra nullius – a land empty and ripe for the taking - to question what it means to practice therapy in a (post)colonial context.^v Moreover, having worked extensively in the areas of family and domestic violence, sexual assault and child protection, my work as a therapist has, from the beginning, been inseparable from issues of social justice and relations of gender and power. This political disposition is not separable from an aesthetic one. As the postcolonial theorist, Couze Venn, has said of the wider need to find a sufficiently nuanced and vigorous response to extremes of discursive and physical violence, the complexity of issues we are asked to respond to as art therapists calls for a poetics, as well as a politics, of transformation (Venn 2000, 2002). To borrow the words of Hélène Cixous, “[t]he ethical question of politics, or responsibility, has always haunted me, as I imagine it haunts all the fireflies irresistibly attracted by the art-candle (Cixous&Calle-Gruber 1997, p. 6).

The question of whom and what we are haunted by inevitably has both an intrapsychic and a cultural inflection. (At first, I typed ‘infection’). This echoes with *Memory* (Kapoor 2008), a structure where the inside is somehow larger and more resonant than the exterior, yet this inside is a fold of the outside, a space hollowed out of histories and memories and echoing with associations. One approaches the outside of this work from one point in the gallery and the inside from yet another, and may not immediately realise these are, materially, parts of the same structure and the same work. [The inside, says Gilles Deleuze (2000), is a fold of the outside: our interiority not separate from the world but hollowed out of criss-crossed, striated space.]

I have therefore been concerned, in my work, to explore how I can creatively and critically mediate the tendency of the domain of therapy to reconstitute, and even to produce, the subjectification of those it seeks to liberate and the problems it seeks to

redress. I have been drawn to approaches to therapy that foreground these concerns, and in particular to the Antipodean approach known as narrative therapy (White & Epston 1990). As a professional art therapist and art therapy educator with an extensive engagement and strong political identification with narrative therapies, I have been interested in the emergence of narrative approaches to arts therapy (e.g. Freeman, Epston & Lobovits 1997; Riley 1999; Riley & Malchiodi 2003; Hoshino & Cameron 2008; Burt 2012), but I have come to question whether it is sufficient to practice arts-based therapy from a 'narrative perspective' (Linnell 2010).

Both art psychotherapy and narrative therapy are informed by aesthetic metaphors and practices. Both also suggest that relationships, biographies and creative processes are central to the work of therapy. However, art therapy and narrative therapy differ radically in the emphasis they respectively place upon the domains of the psychic and the social. My work explores what might open up for the theory and practice of art therapy when these two therapeutic practices are brought (and thought) together. I attempt to explore their obvious differences and subtle compatibilities, the differences and commonalities in their historical and theoretical antecedents, and the possibilities and limitations of each.

Much of my doctoral and postdoctoral work, then, has attempted to respond to the binary I perceive between sociocultural and intrapsychic approaches to art therapy (c.f. Skaife 2008, on the persistent binary of art psychotherapy and art as therapy). It seems to me that poststructural theory, which overtly informs the theoretical basis of narrative therapy and some iterations of psychoanalysis, also enables a critical and yet sympathetic reading of the partly psychoanalytic antecedents of art psychotherapy. More strangely, such theory also invites a critique of aspects of the 'postmodern turn' in the arts therapies, particularly when it comes to an analysis of relations of power.

I find the conversation about art therapy theory more productive when it moves away from the idea of 'applying' theory to practice, even if we do so reflexively or dialectically, in order to produce a something-or-other (in my case, narrative, feminist, postcolonial and poststructural) approach to art therapy. Besides, poststructural theory is more provocation than salve, and applying it tends to result in something rash and perhaps even a bit irritating! Poststructural enquiry troubles the divisions of thought that maintain, and make invisible, particular relations of power and truth, so that a different order of questions becomes possible. Art, therapy and the subject become available for deconstruction.

Rather than 'applying' a poststructural theoretical framework to practice examples from the field of art therapy or inventing a revised theoretical framework for art therapy, I would prefer to problematise the production of the subjects and objects of art therapy, including myself. One of the directions this has taken me recently is into a problematisation of the notion of risk within art therapy and therapy more broadly (Linnell 2012). Another direction that is emerging for me is a questioning of art therapy's recent love affair with neuroscience - our preoccupation with how the discourse of neuroscience might provide an evidence base for art therapy (see Hass-Cohen & Carr 2008). It's not that these areas are not important - indeed opening them up has made many things possible - but that these discourses [Foucault (1980) would say, all discourses] produce relations that tend toward domination. We become implicated in the making of risky individuals and in dividing people into risk categories in order to manage them. We are becoming biological subjects, becoming our brains and our genetic inheritances. We gain power and knowledge in the name of progress - become experts on risk, or on art therapy and the brain, explaining empathy through mirror neurones and change through neuroplasticity. It is not that these ideas don't work, but some of the work they do binds us, and those who come to art therapy, more tightly to the current forms of subjectification.

My work, then, is not an attempt to propose a new theoretical basis for art therapy, but rather, an attempt to take up a particular mode of enquiry into our theories and practices, and into theory itself as a practice. Intellectual work in a poststructural vein unseats both dominant power and the modern subject, and more often undermines than underwrites its own assumptions. This is work that can shake the theoretical ground we stand on, destabilise the power relations of therapy and unsettle those dominant pedagogies that transmit the mystique of therapeutic knowledge through practices of subjectification and ethicalisation. As Sally Swartz has pointed out, “to unlearn clinical privilege is not simply to replace one theory with another, but to move into the realm of negotiating subjectivity itself” (Swartz2005, p. 508).

Because this is a short paper on theory I have said very little about the specifics of how I practice as an art therapist and art therapy educator, although I have written and presented about practice elsewhere. Briefly, I would say that poststructural enquiry into my modes of practice is an ongoing work, and that, as a therapist, educator and researcher, I try to invite a collaborative deconstruction of what Nikolas Rose (2000, p.18) has described as the modern ethos by which “the self is obliged to live its life tied to the project of its own identity”. I also fail at this much of the time, and reproduce much of what I seek to place under critique.

Butler (2004) says her work is addressed to those of us who are ‘beside ourselves’ with rage, grief and passion. Butler’s phrase captures how an ethical response to violence and injustice not only ‘moves’ us to action, but also profoundly decentres the ‘self’. I am often, I confess, ‘beside myself’ in the face of injustices, particularly those that the psychological disciplines perpetrate when the causes, conditions and consequences of injustice are individualised within those who have been subjected to harm. I find that many art therapists are ‘beside ourselves’ in this sense - and that this places us, in all our diversity, alongside each other as well. In this sense, my/our work is a tiny part of an uprising, perhaps not a ‘movement’ in the public sense, but ‘moving’ nevertheless, that

might be said to encompass our professional, social and personal relationships, the clients who are our best and most profound teachers, our colleagues and mentors, our guiding texts, our wider lives. I hope that my particular 'take' on theory - far from unique, located within and indebted to wider questioning within and beyond art therapy - can make a small contribution to situating, unsettling and turning this fertile ground we stand on.

Afterword

That is, more or less, the talk that I gave at the International Art Therapy Conference, *Finding a voice, making your mark: Defining Art Therapy for the 21st Century*, at Goldsmith's College, London, earlier this year, in the panel addressing 'What is the theoretical ground upon which art therapy stands?' Joy Schaverien, Cathy Hyland Moon and I took up a suggestion from our Chair, Karin Danneker that we speak in order of who had travelled the greatest distance to the conference and so I took the stage and began, as things so often begin for me, with a poem. It was a pleasure and privilege - and more than a little intimidating - to take a stand beside these women whose work is so well known and among the key texts (e.g. Hyland Moon 2002; Schaverien 1991) for students in the Master of Art Therapy at the University of Western Sydney, Australia, where I teach.

Our intention had been to each speak briefly and then to develop our ideas further during discussion time, in response to questions, formulated from the Chair, which Danneker had asked us to provide context for in advance. However, this plan was confounded by limits of time and the different styles of the presenters. Retrospectively I can see how we, separately and together in this panel, performed, as much as spoke about, the different perspectives from which we come.

I began with a poem and moved into a discussion of theory. I left the question of “what does this theoretical position mean in practice?” to be asked of me at a later point (one that did not arrive due to the vigour and brevity of the plenary discussion) - thereby exposing my contribution to the critique that poststructural theory is too, well, *theoretical*, and that the complexity of its language, often contorted and contorting in order to disturb the taken-for-granted and draw attention to the invisible and marginalised, can ironically become exclusionary.

This was a critique of theory that Hyland Moon referenced before moving into a presentation that engaged the audience directly in an experience of the notion that they, parallel with the ‘clients’ of art therapists (including participants in the inclusive open studio that Hyland Moon and her colleagues have started in one of the most disadvantaged areas of Chicago), are co-producers, rather than the subjects, of knowledge. This opened up the plenary, mid-way, to the audience in an attempt to radically redistribute ‘ownership’ of what might be recognised as knowledge, within this plenary and in art therapy more broadly. Yet arguably, this gesture encountered what can be seen as a major tension in the post-Marxist approaches such as critical theory and radical pedagogy that inform many social and community approaches to art therapy. If ‘consciousness-raising’ and ‘empowerment’ are forms, albeit radical and progressive forms, of education, then ‘teaching’ people that they are knowledge generators is still teaching them something from a meta-position of knowledge, thereby reproducing some of the power relations such approaches attempt to critique.

Schaverien spoke last: a quiet and insistently subversive influence working within and against convention. Her long term theoretical project is continuous and reflexive^{vi}, reinventing itself to meet each challenge, the latest being how she might address the legacies of separation and systemic brutalisation of boys in the English public school system. Schaverien (2004, 2011) approaches this through analytic art psychotherapy that is intensely individual, yet her work is as socially significant as more explicitly

community-oriented approaches to art therapy. It makes possible the redress of a harmful cultural experience, rather than allowing it to be repressed and then reproduced and relayed through the relationships and actions of privileged yet traumatised people, many of whom hold key leadership positions in political and industrial systems of power.

Wisely chaired by Danneker, this conference session enacted and challenged binaries between art therapy theory and practice, and between social and individual approaches to art therapy. Within and between these three, differently situated responses to the question of 'where we might stand', and in the impassioned plenary discussion that followed, it became obvious, once again, that there can be no 'last word' on art therapy.

Brief biography

Sheridan Linnell leads the Master of Art Therapy training course at the University of Western Sydney, Australia. She is interested in arts-based research methodologies and poststructural, feminist, narrative and postcolonial approaches to art therapy. Her work examines how the subjects and practices of art therapy are shaped by and resist dominant discourse. Sheridan is a practicing poet and joint Editor of *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art Therapy*.

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ⁱ When I wrote this poem and sent it to Bronwyn Davies, with whom I visited the Anish Kapoor retrospective at the MCA, she responded with a poem of her own, beginning an

exchange of poetry, art and schizoanalysis that has developed into a conference presentation (Linnell& Davies 2013). We hope to subsequently publish the conference paper, which has a decidedly different emphasis to the current article.

ⁱⁱ I am using the word 'subject' here in Foucault's sense, to denote a specific historical form of relationship to oneself:

There are two meanings to the word "subject": subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity through a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to. (Foucault 2000, p. 331)

It is this second meaning of 'subject' - the idea that 'self-knowledge' is a modern form of power that can be a source of subjugation, that it shapes us into self-regulatory individuals focussed on individual insight and autonomy - that troubles the widely held notion that psychotherapy liberates.

ⁱⁱⁱPoststructural theory is itself a mobile and contested area, a term invented post-hoc by US academics to describe some possibly related tendencies in late 20th century continental philosophy (Butler 1999). Poststructuralism overlaps with postmodernism but arguably differs from it by placing emphasis on the constitutive effects of power, knowledge and desire. Debra Britzman gives a concise working definition that I continue to find useful:

Poststructural theories raise critical concerns about what it is that structures meanings, practices, and bodies, about why certain practices become intelligible, valorised or deemed as traditions, while other practices become discounted, impossible or unimaginable. For poststructuralists, representation is always in crisis, knowledge is constitutive of power, and agency is the constitutive effect, and not the originator, of situated practices and histories... (Britzman 2000, p. 30).

^{iv}See Linnell (2010) for a detailed account of how each of these poststructural theorists has influenced my work.

^v Choosing the work of an internationally renowned Indian-born British sculptor as the subject of my opening poem might seem at odds with positioning myself within a postcolonial Australian context, but the aptness of being moved by Kapoor's exhibition in Sydney before coming to present this paper in London, where Kapoor trained and established a reputation and where I was born, was not lost on me.

^{vi} I find Schaverien's way of taking up a post-Jungian perspective to be a far cry from the 'shamanic' tendencies in the expressive arts therapies that I have attempted to deconstruct elsewhere (Linnell 2010).