

# ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

## Art Therapy Large Group

### Sally Skaife and Robin Tipple

We, the conference organisers, hoped the provision of an Art Therapy Large Group (ATLG) for the conference on each of the three days, would give delegates the opportunity to explore, through the use of art, performance and dialogue, their experiences of the conference and the dynamics that arise in a large group. We had run an ATLG at our first art therapy conference (Finding a voice, making your mark: defining art therapy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century) in 2013, and hoped there might be some continuity between the first and second ATLG, a development of the dialogue of word, performance and image through time.

In the ATLG the relationship between talking and art making is amplified, highlighting the performative aspect of art making and emphasising the interaction between artist, audience, and context. Since we believe that the Art Therapy Large Group magnifies the dynamics present in all art therapy groups and encounters, we felt that an ATLG would present a good arena for the whole conference together to think about the conference theme, finding spaces, making places, as it relates to the practices of Art Therapy around the world. All delegates share, in common, experience of the social and political world, its events and its institutions, just as they do the natural world and its changes. However, individuals and groups of people experience this differently according to how they are situated in the world. The Art Therapy Large Group is premised on the understanding that the bounded space of

the group, which is open to all delegates, allows these differences, which the conference brings together, to be expressed and explored.

It is part of the nature of large groups that no one person has an overview. What follows immediately is a brief interpretative reflection on the work of the group from the subjective perspective of the experience of having facilitated the group.

The first question that emerges in the group in relation to the theme concerns the boundaries; on the first day, a delegate appears to be leaving the group just after it has commenced. A discussion about boundaries gradually shifts as the group directs its attention, through verbal discussion, towards the present political situation. There is a recognition that there are insiders and outsiders, natives and foreigners; the culturally adept, those who struggle in the situation and those who find themselves in an unfamiliar place. Who is welcome here and how safe is it? – seems to be the question. A constructed home, making use of a table and art materials, provides security – but it appears to be dangerous in the streets. A group member performs being a lion and circles round the central space as if in search of prey. There is humour in this play but the impression is that a wild carnivore is loose in the room. Another question that arises verbally is: can this place provide what is needed – are there enough resources for all? Can the group be open to all? It seems to be agreed that there must be limits. All agree that it was expensive to get to this place, and that a lack of resource excludes others from the place. The space is divided and divisions are reiterated on each occasion. With the use of tape in each meeting, the central area where the group finds a place for art making performance and expression, is divided into four. Delegates making work negotiate their way around this tape. The tape, being sticky, ends up decorated. If the tape represents divisions within the group, do the lines of fracture also join? The tape is adjoined to the facilitators' chairs. The facilitators are sitting on opposite sides of the group. Are the authorities in communication with each other?

There are other differences, other than the differences that relate to place of birth, that find room for expression, differences for which, in the not too distant past, one could have been prosecuted. This difference is performed through the use of improvised costume and discussed in relation to the political and the social. The group is reminded that differences, of all kinds, can incite political and social persecution. What languages can be used in the space? Songs are introduced and they facilitate an introduction to the variability of cultural identity and presentation of self. In the space created by the seating there is plenty of activity with the materials and communication takes place visually. What is seen is variable because of the size of the group. Individuals can feel that that they have not been heard as the room is too large, the space too big perhaps, but also there is insufficient space, in terms of time, to say all that needs to be said. There is a suggestion that something more demonstrative of welcome and perhaps some structure, is what is wanted. In the middle and last group, amongst reasoned, heart-felt discussion, angry declarations about the ATLG are made. It seemed to us, that these less positive expressions might mean, that though it was not experienced as such at the time, the ATLG was providing a necessary forum for strong feelings to be expressed and listened to.

There will be many delegates who experienced the group quite differently to us and we have presented our interpretative and reflective text to the reader in the hope that this will be understood as a partial account, and that giving a full, or even fair, account of the processes that characterised the groups is an impossible task. With this in mind we have appended below some comment and extended reflections that we did receive from those who were present and we would like to thank these contributors for giving our brief reflection of the conference Art Therapy Large Group more substance.

### **Oihika Chakrabarti**

Regarding your question about the large group, I think it works well within a training programme such as the one I did as a student at Goldsmiths,

however you may wish to rethink the structure within a conference setting even if the purpose is to promote Goldsmiths' sound ethos in training.

## **Sue Curtis**

### ***Preface***

Having been part of the Dance Movement Psychotherapy programme since its inception 15 years ago, I have for many years held a curiosity and fantasy as to what an Art Therapy large group experience was like and harboured a desire to take part in one! The opportunity to take part in one, on three consecutive days at the Conference was an exciting prospect and re-sparked the fantasies that had stirred within me over the years.

I had imagined a huge space, full of art materials, with individuals quietly sensing the moment to engage and set about art making. Others would sit and silently, respectfully, witness this process, as the space and witnesses were transformed amidst an array of colour, shapes and pieces. At the end, these offerings would be viewed and shared and meaning making would reveal itself from the processing of feelings, connections and associations that ensued!

Needless to say, my actual experience was somewhat different, but profoundly moving and I am grateful for the opportunity to reflect on it personally here.

### ***Day 1***

I climb the stairs to the room full of excitement as to what I am going to find. Opening the door I see rows of chairs set out around a central space containing boxes of art materials – so many goodies to explore!! The space fills up and the chatter comes to a hush as Sally and Robin introduce the Large Group and my ears take in some words 'stay in the room, share any talking with the whole group....' But my eyes are hungrily scanning the materials and I wonder how on earth all these people are going to fit in the centre to create something? Maybe there is an implicit code of turn taking or

respectful withdrawal to make space for another and I let the questions go and trust it will become clear over the hour and a half. I just sit with the knowledge that I am extremely lucky to have this opportunity, want to be present to every minute of it and try and quieten my body to sense the space. I feel I have entered an inner sanctum of an up-till-then, only thought about world!

I see someone move in who begins to search the boxes and paper and so on, she is joined by another and instantly my body leaves the chair as I make my way over to the treasures before me. Colours, textures, glitter, glue, shells and so much more to touch and handle, an absolute cornucopia of wonderfulness to work with. My fingers and eyes are delighting in every new discovery. I have a flash back to being 7 years old and a tatty old pink zipped case that I had, which held all kinds of odds and ends and lost or broken pieces of dolls, games and puzzle bits. I am utterly entranced and so absorbed that at first I hardly notice that people are talking across the room. I look up and am suddenly aware of a divide – the art makers are quiet, whilst some of those seated talk even louder and to my shock not about what is happening in the room with the materials. Their noise suddenly feels intrusive and I am somewhat anxious and can't shut out the chatter. I feel like I am alone in a room with the TV on in another, blaring out a political programme. Talk of refugees fly across my head – hmm interesting – then a door slams 'has someone left the room?' I hear – interpretations and what feels like heady, psychotherapy speak bubble above me and I keep wondering why they are not joining us to create? The image from the Schultz 'Peanuts' cartoon of 'Psychiatric help – the Doctor is in' pops into my head, so I find a cardboard box and sit in it in an attempt to join with the words flashing across the room.

The divide between words and art-making seems, in my mind, reflected in the large strip of tape that has divided the physical space. I am fighting my own desire to be judgemental and reconcile the uncomfortableness within me by sitting still and watching the creations around me. I reach a place of silence

within, and despite my questions, sense the containment of the space and its facilitators. I rest.

## ***Day 2***

The group begins and I am aware of the dichotomy of words and creating that I hold from the day before. I want to wait, listen, take time, but my body has other ideas and I find myself crawling towards the boxes of goodies. I smile inside that I am so eager to engage with the physicality of the materials and remind myself that I want to make use of these precious three days. A weird clump of packaging material catches my eye and I tug and pull at it and it expands like a net. I step in, put my arms through aware that I want to stand and step in it, but everyone else is on the floor. Oh well here goes – I stand and step in and find myself encased by its textures that both hold and constrain me at the same time. The central part of the room again has tape dividing spaces and I hear a comment about boundaries and borders for refugees and a sad ache twists within me. I wonder about my own place within the group, the invitation to this sacred space, the privilege of such richness of experience whilst others struggle for necessities. I make a brief connection to some words in the room!

Later, though the chatter from above stirs the irritation from the day before and I cannot block it out. I want to scream 'shut-up' 'what's your point?' and struggle again with my inability to make sense of what is going on in the larger experience of the group/community. I tell myself to just be and let it go and trust again in the containment of the facilitators.

I find myself exploring strands of coloured wool and trying to weave them into my hair, perhaps in an attempt to soothe the brittleness of the flung words. Someone comes behind me and whispers 'can I help you?' I pass her the strands and she tenderly begins to plait them into my hair. I am deeply touched at her presence and memories of my Mother doing my hair as a child fill me with a tearful connection. She continues until my head is adorned with all manner of coloured plaits and I begin to smile as they remind me of the

'Plumb Bobs' that are installed in another part of the conference and are a vital part of my experience on the conference that I have been exploring. 'I've got Plumb Bobs!' I exclaim. I am so moved by the reaching out of this stranger to help me with such a simple task and her act of kindness.

As I survey the room at the end and see spaces and pictures and all manner of creations a sense of finding a small place within the vast community, a real human connection with a stranger warms me and ignites more curiosity and rumination to take away.

### ***Day 3***

I sit and wait for the final group to begin and am aware of the deep sadness I feel that it is the last day.

I move onto the floor and wait some prompting from within me as to where my eyes and hands will take me today, and to what magical moments will be revealed. The central part of the room is again taped and divided. I find myself making little shelves from cardboard to hang on the and delicately placing small shells on them. A memory emerges of when I was on tour as a dancer, and of the small trinkets that I took with me to place in hotel rooms and apartments to make the space feel familiar and homely. Across the room in another quadrant someone has hung a door and I find myself snaking my way on the floor through people, materials and bits of furniture, to make my way through it. The cardboard door is small and I'm not even sure I will get through it, and have to squiggle and heave my body through to reach the other side. A thought occurs to me that maybe I should have asked permission from its creator to enter?

I journey on through the space, passing what feels like intimate drawings and personal created responses to this shared time together. I am struck by their beauty, moved by their simplicity and complexity and honoured at being allowed to witness them. I worry that my physical disability and limitations may have made me clumsy and noisy in moving around such delicate pieces

and if I have in some way, like the words, intruded upon their unspoken boundaries and place in the room.

I make my way back to where I started and gaze upon the sticky tape that surrounds me. I crawl towards it and my hair sticks on it. I pull away and strands are left hanging there and I find myself repeating this movement along a short segment of the tape. I find pieces of wool from the day before and hang them there in strips, along with pieces of fabric and I am struck by the image of my hair hanging there and the idea of what part of me is left behind in this space. As I gaze around the room the idea extends to the rest of the people and their art offerings and words that have filled our time together.

I realise that comments that have flown across the room that initially irritated me, have in fact taken root and the plight of refugees finding a space, a place, a home elsewhere has deeply imprinted itself within my thoughts, art explorations and movement. The experience of the 'Large group' has provided such a wealth within me. I am so grateful for the time.

As the room is cleared for the final time I take my strip of sticky tape, hair, wool and fabrics with me and it now hangs as a reminder in my office and continues to provide reflections.

### **Tsun-wei Lily Hsu**

As a Goldsmiths graduate, walking into the conference art therapy large group is a strange feeling. On one hand I am glad to be back, on the other hand I realise this is really not "our" large group, which is a sense of loss. I missed our year group strongly in the conference.

However, I can also see my own progress through these training years until now. During my first year, I was a quiet passive participant. Quite often I felt overwhelmed by the brutal materials, the big circle seemed like a dangerous place to enter, being invisible was like a survival strategy. In my second year, I thought I could not always hide. Therefore, I forced myself to make some art



works in the circle. Actually, it was not as scary as I thought. Being a more active participant, I experienced the group in a very different way, I felt more connected with others and could really take in what was in the air. I didn't feel as vulnerable as in the first year. I was glad I had the ability to change role. Being back again in the conference large group, this is the first time I am able to speak in the group. I taped down the Chinese character of "group" on the floor, this is also the first time I am able to express my cultural identity in the group, which I tried very hard to avoid when I studied here.

Somehow the large group feels like a journey of how I try to find my own voice, own identity and survival strategy in the war zone (I always relate large group to the image of war zone). I am glad we have a large group in the conference, as it helps me stay in touch with the intensity of group dynamics, and see how am I progressing through these years.

### **Dr Tae Jung Park**

Comments about large group in the conference: being a student at Goldsmiths studying Masters and PhD from 2005 to 2016, I realised that I learnt not only a new area of study but also a distinctive culture in obtaining knowledge within the particular time and space. I think that the large group of the conference is one of the examples of the particularities of Goldsmiths. However engaging with the large group for such a long time does not mean that it gets comfortable, as I always find myself struggling with the opposing feelings between wanting to be actively engaged and disengaged, and wanting to join in conversations actively and just listening carefully.

I think that I was actively engaged emotionally in the large group at the conference as it was a great opportunity to end my journey of study at Goldsmiths at that time. The emotion was totally doubled when, in the last group, another group member spoke about my finishing my PhD and suggested to everyone that they congratulate me. I was overwhelmed and speechless. How powerful the group was. I won't ever forget the moment. I was proud of myself surviving and it paid back all my hard time during the

study. I feel thankful to everyone in the group.

### **Francesca La Nave**

Francesca has provided the following link to some drawings that she made in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and final Art Therapy Large Group. Francesca has referred to these drawings in her account of the Social Dreaming Workshop and she feels that the drawings relate to material explored in the Dreaming Workshop and the Art Therapy Large Group, that both groups were engaged in exploring the conference matrix.

To view images go to:

<https://goo.gl/photos/wyXMgXJNjeJKqYnB6>