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Title: Art for women's sake: Understanding feminist art therapy as didactic practice re-orientation

## ABSTRACT

Catalysed through the coming together of feminist theories that debate 'the politics of difference' and through a reflection on the practices of art psychotherapy this paper seeks to illuminate the progressive and empowering nature that creative applications have for better mental health. It also seeks to critically expose and evaluate some of the marginalisation work that is also done within art psychotherapy practices, ultimately proposing a developmental practice activity and resource hub that will raise awareness, challenge traditional ways of thinking and doing, and provide a foundation for more inclusive practices.

This paper's introduction is followed by a contextualisation of art therapy and third wave feminisms, with suggestion of how those can work together towards better praxis. The main discussion is the presentation of a newly developed practitioner activity and resource hub that art therapists can utilise to evaluate their current and on-going practice towards one of greater inclusivity and better reflexivity. Finally, in conclusion there will be a drawing together of what has been possible in feminist art psychotherapy, what is still possible, and with further alliances what could still yet be possible.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Supporting the growth of critically aware patients will enable service users to recognise the implications of difficulties in society at large influencing their well-being.
- More 'critical patient' therapy is likely to work quicker, be more effective, and continually challenge the direction of practice development.
- The production and exhibition of more critically based art by service users will be a platform from where the voices of the socially marginalised can be meritoriously heard and listened to.
- Critical reflexivity within the profession opens up possibilities for changing the current make-up of practitioner demographics.

- The significance of current anti-feminist sentiments is likely to hinder take up of an explicitly feminist approach to practice development.

KEYWORDS: Art Psychotherapy, Feminist, Intersectionality, Critical Praxis.

## INTRODUCTION

*'L'art pour l'art'*<sup>i</sup> or *'art for art's sake'* and the autotelic/aesthetic nature of art deliberation has been on-going since the Victorian times when John Ruskin<sup>ii</sup> espoused that social context was integral to art; and notwithstanding the backlash against his thinking, at the time of its origination, it reverberates strongly in the contemporary era (Villada, 1998). However strong the conviction to embrace art as socially and politically informed the extent to which there is a going beyond *'art for art's sake'* is still up for debate.

Using art based materials as a form of communication and expression art therapy is a form of psychotherapy that seeks to enable service users through the creation of a safe space in which they can grow and develop on a personal level and work towards creating positive change in their lives (BAAT, 2013). Feminist art psychotherapy has been about raising awareness of the oppression of women in society and the practice of forging social justice for women through a recognition of the connectedness between the personal, social, and political consciousness; but those ideals have largely been located as advocating the middle class white Western second wave feminist movement of the 1960s-70s (Sajnani, 2012). Since this time feminists working in the area of critical race theories have been pivotal in exposing the racist tendencies endemic in the second wave feminist movement. Their challenges have led to an understanding of feminism being about the intersectionality of social divisions grounded by relationships of power (Anzaldúa, 1987; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984; Minh-ha, 1989; Mohanty, 1991; Spivak, 1985; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Whilst some work has been done to re-orientated arts based psychotherapies in more critical reflection, this is sparse and lacks the momentum of third wave feminisms that seek to broaden the feminist struggle.

This paper seeks to suggest how art therapy and current feminist theory can be collaborators towards social change and social justice, and from there to make practical recommendations for practice development. Our hope is that the practice activity and resources we have developed will both inspire and enabled art therapists to de-emphasis

the more personal focus of their work in order to give prominence to the political aspects, thereby engaging in a more politically edified practice as a way of transforming lives and affecting change in the social world. And it is not just women who need to be engaged in such approaches. As hooks<sup>iii</sup> (2003) points out it is important that marginalised men have a voice and are heard, and that all men take a critical look at aspects of their lives so that they can engage with their own accountability.

The practice experience of facilitating an art therapy workshop, attended by a group of young women from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds, served to inspire the writing of this paper and the development of the evaluation activity and resource hub. No research was carried out with regard to the workshop. It is the experience of facilitating the workshop, alongside the professional conversations and collaborative action between an art therapy practitioner and a feminist researcher and theorist, which have been the impetus for the practice reflexivity that informs this paper and the practice development proposed within it. The overall aim of the workshop was to enable young women, over the course of workshop and through the use of art, was to explore difficult or painful feelings, and to offer the opportunity for the young women to communicate their unconscious processes, experiences, thoughts and feelings both non-verbally and verbally. In addition, and specifically because art was involved, the workshop offered strategies in support of overcoming problems and difficulties for those who struggled to express themselves verbally, suffered with low self-esteem, lacked confidence, or were emotionally vulnerable. The workshop also gave participants the opportunity for development on a personal level through self-awareness raising around issues including self-governance, self-respect and self-confidence. Ultimately, suggestions for continued and improved well-being evolved from the workshop for individuals and collectively using the emerging themes of loss, trauma, low self-esteem, connecting to withdrawn others, low mood often involving feelings of sadness and anger, and bullying and abuse including domestic and racial abuse. What emerged from this workshop were the limitations of current art therapy approaches and resources, and a need for radical practice development so that art therapy, as a form of social justice, can inclusively speak to and facilitate a talking back by patients, and be critically accountable (hook, 1998).

## CONTEXT

## Background to art therapy

The British Association of Art Therapists (BAAT) was formed in 1964 and is the governing body of art therapists in the UK. Art therapy has its origins in Europe and the United States of America and is historically rooted primarily in psychoanalysis (Killick & Schaverien, 2002), which has been critiqued as often times imposing over simplified Freudian determinants of mental health, and this is especially so in relation to women (Hogan, 2003). With a history, located by some back in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, it is largely from the 1940s that use of art therapy has gained momentum (Waller, 1991), and art therapy today is widely accepted as a progressive and effective form of psychotherapy, forming an established part of NHS mental health services.

Art therapy has traditionally been practiced by women, and women still tend to dominate the profession. Statistics from BAAT taken in 2009 show that 70% of art therapists working in the UK were women (Waller, 2003). However, despite this there has been a dearth of research and publications on issues relating to gender or feminist informed art therapy. Whilst there is a small number of writers who have offered gendered research critiques and analysis of art therapy (Hogan, 1997), such as from Eastwood, 2012; Huet, 1997; Malchiodi, 1997; Mishkin 1971, there is much research and work still to be done; not least because many writers who emphasis feminist approaches to art therapy offer gendered analysis that negate the intersection of gender with race, ethnicity, age, class, disability, and sexuality.

Critics of the domination of art therapy by white middle class liberal thinking women have pointed out that art therapist training has been Eurocentric and inclined to appeal to this particular group of women, which is reflected in the landscape of the majority of practitioners today. In 1989, led by Jenny Cooper (2005), a group within BAAT was formed (Campbell, Fabre-Lewin, Gaga, and Waller), the Art Therapy, Race, and Culture Group (ARC), and this comprised of art therapists interested particularly in more inclusive practice that was sensitive to the needs of the marginalised and disenfranchised. It is principally due to ARC, and their interest in the politics of 'difference' that there has been some questioning of traditional art therapy practices, and of who practices art therapy and the training they undergo. ARC also drew attention to the fact that increasingly it is vulnerable and traumatised service users with experiences of social marginalisation and disenfranchisement who are engaging in art therapy. Such agitation has led more recently

to inclusion of debates around the politics of 'difference' in the training of art therapists. However, many existing practitioners continue to work within the context of the training they underwent (Ward, 2005), and it is those therapists that this paper's recommendations will be looking to engage.

Hogan (2012) in her work on feminist approaches to art therapy has been significant in talking about making the link between the personal and political, and not just in the sense that this is important in terms of the work services users engage in, but also in terms of there being more accountability of practitioners' socio-cultural positions, as a move towards raising more significantly the political dimension of art therapy. Fundamentally art therapy lends itself to feminist action as it is about the vulnerable, marginalised, and traumatised in society, and about the liberal thinking values of empowerment and of gaining social justice for the social disenfranchised; and so a more didactic feminist practice is wholly appropriate. But art therapy is also most often practiced by the liberal minded socially privileged with a tradition of positioning the vulnerable as oppressed and victims and themselves as the enablers (Hogan, 2012), and so it is important for such practitioners to consider critically how their own position and thinking impacts the therapeutic relationships they are engaged in (Cooper, 2005). Maintaining fundamental values and actions towards empowerment and social change, whilst also challenging the socially privileged is what could significantly re-orientate art therapy.

Further analysis and research in this area is undoubtedly required, and as recent work by Sajnani (2012) – a drama psychotherapist - has suggested, an association between creative arts therapy and current third wave feminist theories is one way of ensuring practice development that is as inclusive as possible. But such calls for action often remain just calls, and the development of strategies and approaches which push the boundaries of practice persistently go unexplored and/or un-development. Further, calls for a more inclusive feminist art therapy need to be informed not only by third wave feminism, but also by the current transitioning feminist debates around the re-emergence of a sense of the collective, and of points of connection and association between what might otherwise be considered individually 'different' women (Grewal, 2005).

Background to feminism

Over the last fifty years feminism and feminist studies has gone through a process of formation, a flourishing, and more latterly a crisis. The more recent crisis stage is synonymous with notions of society being in a state of post-feminism. Feminist Studies grew out of the second wave women's liberation movement of the 1960s and for a number of reasons, including equality legislation, demands from students, and feminist academic pressure, it took hold as a subject within universities during the 1980s. From the 1980s onwards, and with the impact of third wave feminisms, began a questioning by Black and post-colonial feminists (Anzaldúa, 1987; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984; Minh-ha, 1989; Mohanty, 1991; Spivak, 1985; Yuval-Davis, 2006) of the need for a discrete interrogation of society based on gender alone (Wallach Scott, 2008). During this time of introspection it has been argued that a disconnection ensued between the practice politics and everyday struggles and resistance of women activists, and what feminist academics were theorising about (Weigman, 2008).

Now, with the current re-emergence of notions of collectivity, feminism is still about challenging social injustices and raising awareness by engaging in critical thinking about knowledge, about understanding the personal as political, and about taking action; but it is also now about doing so through collaborations and associations, and further, about reimagining feminism by seeing practice settings as a locus for social transformations and change (hooks, 2010).

The use of reflective practice by health and social care practitioners asks them to learn to be more internalised, to reflect on themselves and their actions and decisions. In terms of art therapists such reflection has focused on counter-transference<sup>iv</sup> within the therapeutic relationship and has largely failed to challenge practitioners to engage in a more complex multifaceted self-reflexivity that challenges them to critique their own socio-cultural position. But what feminism offers is a challenge to go beyond just a turn towards the self, and instead to engage in a 'double turn', a productive gazing back towards Others. There is a need to be self-critical, and for an accountability that is not just practiced from the comfort of traditional laudatory models of reflection that all too often seek to produce stories of resolution. But instead to turn away from one's self towards Others (Ahmed, 2004), and to exist as uncomfortable and constantly agitated with the power and privilege of being practicing professionals; to feel the agitation and discomfort of being confronted with the realisation that good liberalism<sup>v</sup> is not so good after all (Brown, 2008). And it is this

mindfulness that can go some way to creating useful and transformative feminist praxis (Issitt, 1999).

## DISCUSSION

The question remains, for both feminism and feminist art therapy, of how to resist neo-liberalism and in so doing still be true to the principles of raising awareness. Harding (2005) has pointed out that because of the fluid nature of subjectivities and identity (Hogan, 2012; Butler, 1999) it is likely to be an on-going process, which is impossible to achieve, but is worth engaging in, so that Othered voices<sup>vi</sup> and their parallel knowledges are heard and acted upon; because such provision can offer points of transformation so that together the practice of speech and action can provide a foundation for communal transgressions, and for those transgressions to be liberating.

The workshop that inspired this paper was influential because it differed in that it involved a group of women only, and women from varying social and ethnic backgrounds. The resources used for the workshop were standard art therapy resources, including clay work, and a gender neutral visualisation narrative whereby a service user creates a piece of art related to a character that resonates with them in the story they are listening to. But the inappropriateness of these resources came to light as the workshop progressed. It soon became obvious, through many of the young women's expressions, that the clay available, through its colour (standard light grey, drying to white), only reflected a dominant white culture; and the attempt to install equity by stripping away any cultural context in the visualisation narrative was an exercise in negating and devaluing difference, and therefore served only to reinforce dominant cultural norms as the marker by which equality is measured (Ahmed, 2004). Illuminated by this workshop was how universalist approaches dominate art therapy practice and resources. Developing art therapy practice to re-orientate itself around the emotional, social, and political needs of marginalised and vulnerable patients requires a more critically based form of practice, and a joining up with more critically based feminist theories is a way of providing that transformation (Sajnani, 2012). In order to achieve this, what is suggested is a didactic re-orientation to art therapy practice, in the sense that what is proposed is socially and politically instructive about recognising and acting upon social justices, and is a radical departure and repositioning from what is currently practiced.



We want to turn now to explain the evaluation activity we have developed that will support art therapists in thinking through how they practice and the resources they draw on in their practice. Such resources include what inhabits the environments in which they practice, for example, the art displayed on practice walls, the books, toys, or figures used for patients' creative reference or inspiration, the colours and textures of materials patients engage with in art making, such as paint, pencils, pastels, crayons, paper, clay, sand, glue, masks, and fabrics, to name just some; and in the sense that the art therapist is a resource themselves, what language and discourses they engage in, and the training and practice development they undertake. The Bechdel test (Bechdel, 2012) was invented by feminist writer and cartoonist Alison Bechdel in the 1980s as a way of establishing whether a film could be determined as feminist or not. The test involves determining of a film, that:

1. It has to have at least two [named] women in it
2. Who talk to each other
3. About something besides a man

(Bechdel, 2012).

Whilst this test is limited to an understanding of women being singularly constituted according to gender alone (Anzaldúa, 1987; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1984; Minh-ha, 1989; Mohanty, 1991; Spivak, 1985; Yuval-Davis, 2006) we have found it useful as a foundation to formulate a practice development evaluation activity, which art therapists can use to determine, through the critical questioning to resource choices, the extent to which their practice is universalist in approach. The adapted the Bechdel (Bechdel, 2012) evaluation activity asks three questions of each resource an art therapist utilises:

1. Are the resources used reflective of women's and girls' experiences?
2. And, women and girls from different ethnic, racial, age, class, sexual orientations, and disability backgrounds?
3. And, do the resources used seek social justice for women/girls?

We decided not to have criterion of whether resources could be said to come from a woman because just being a woman does not necessarily make you care about the oppressive experiences of other women or the disenfranchisement of particular social groups (hooks, 2010). The first criterion therefore asks whether, through a focus on women's experiences, it is seeking to raise consciousness about women's position in

society. The second criterion is informed by the third wave feminist movement and asks whether there is inclusion of the experiences of not only white middle class women. It is important that the criteria reflects current thinking within feminist thought and Feminist Studies on the politics of 'difference', otherwise only one particular type of feminism would be significant and valued above any other. Feminist writers and researchers such as Daly (1973; 1978), from the second wave feminist movement, have often talked about a single monolithic woman experience, and in so doing negated the experiences of women beyond those from a white middle class background. The third criterion seeks to identify if simply a commentary on women's lives is present or if there is an agenda of pursuing the positive transformation of women's lives. We hypothesise a likely response being that most practitioners find their current resources meeting one or two of the evaluation activity criteria very infrequently, and meet all three criteria often not at all.

The activity offers practitioners the opportunity to carry out a quick assessment of the resources they currently use in their practice, which will inform a rapid diagnosis of the extent to which experiences of the socially marginalised are negated within their practice. However, some training in how to apply the activity questions to resources is necessary, because to be able to assess the fit between the activity criteria and practice resources, practitioners would need to be aware of what is meant by practice resources, and also to have an understanding of the feminist approach that informs the activity and the questions that sit within it. When we used the activity ourselves it worked well for assessing most art therapy resources, such as books, images, continued professional development engagement, language and discourse etc., but it was more ambiguous when it came to assessing actual art materials, such as paper, paint, clay etc. When assessing these resources it was first necessary to establish if the materials could, through art making, constitute the everyday life experiences (Stanley & Wise, 2002) of socially marginalised women and girls; and this required a more metaphorical and psychoanalytical interpretation that warrants further exploration than has so far been possible. The activity taught us that most mainstream art therapy resources are exclusive in nature, and that the thinking through or even consideration of gendered and marginalised experiences in the practice of art therapy is negligible, which led us to contemplate how transformation of such disregard might be possible.

Using the evaluation activity can raise awareness of practitioners' orientation, but does not offer support in terms of transforming that position, and so we have developed a resource hub for practitioners to access using the image based social media site Pinterest. Pinterest is ideal in that it is image based and so lends itself to the creative arts. It is also an open access site and so can be used potentially by anyone. Further, it also offers a mapping provision that allows us to connect and engage with similar thinkers, and therefore offers a useful way of developing and sustaining the hub in a meaningful way. The site can be accessed by via <http://www.pinterest.com/kentarttherapy/>, where there are a variety of named boards of which each has particular suggested resources sitting within it, such as books, art, artists, children's picture books etc., with some supplementary information for many of the resources. The resources in the hub meet the criteria of the adapted Bechdel test (Bechdel, 2012), which was not always easy to achieve. Many of the material resources featured are more expensive and it is more difficult to find retailers that sell them as opposed to selling just mainstream materials. This is concerning because with 90% of art therapists in the UK practicing in a public sector (BAAT, 2013), a public sector currently affected by an economic climate of austerity, finding budgets that will afford additional more costly resources is unlikely to be straightforward. In contrast many of the books are available in part or wholly open access electronic format, and the art similarly is not difficult to find via desktop based research; and so in this sense an electronic resources offers advantages. It is our ambition to use the practice activity and resources hub as a starting point from which to build momentum towards a transformation in practice development for art therapists; and to continually progress and improve both the activity and the hub through evaluation of their significance to practice development.

## CONCLUSION

Feminist cultural theorist have focused on the importance of the politics of women's everyday life experiences (Stanley & Wise, 2002), and thinking what that means in terms of women's sense of identity, and the art that came out of the inspirational workshop highlighted at the beginning of this paper, it is possible to imagine not just feminist art therapy, but critical art therapy praxis. The workshop enabled the young women to express and explore every day experiences and feelings about their sense of identity, and not just in terms of the whole group doing the workshop, but also of the wider community and society

as a whole. But beyond this the young women prompted a critical and reflexive look at art therapy practice and resources that has led to a proposal for a progressively radical and didactic direction for art therapy. The workshop, the art created from it, and the facilitation of it, offered a point of reference from which it was possible to think about how feminism could be reimagined, and how that reimagining could bring art therapy to a radical re-orientation, and therefore work towards action and change through collaborative associations.

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<sup>i</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> Century French slogan.

<sup>ii</sup> John Ruskin was a prominent social thinker of Victorian times, and was the era's most influential art critic. He was also a writer, artist, art patron, and philanthropist. Somewhat of a progressive for his time, many late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century political and social reformers took inspiration from Ruskin's ideas and writings.

<sup>iii</sup> Gloria Jean Watkins writes under the pseudonym bell hooks, which is intentionally in lower case to signify the importance of her work over her name. It is her great-grandmother's name and serves as namesake support for resistance against being silenced as her grandmother was an unpopular, yet outspoken, critic of both her family a community (hook, 1998).

<sup>iv</sup> The feelings a therapist may have about a patient or service user.



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<sup>v</sup> Brown (2008) has been significant in writing about the problems of progressive middle class liberal ways of thinking, and how they fundamentally move towards universal ways of understanding; and in this sense work to strip away social and cultural contexts in seeking always to find commonality.

<sup>vi</sup> 'Othering' is used as a binary form of knowledge. In the Saidian sense (1978) this relates directly to how the Occident has conceptualised and invented the Orient, and thereby itself, through the production of the Orient's contrasting image (Said, 1978, pp. 1–2, 5–7). However, Said's argument lacks any offering of a gendered analysis, and therefore the work of Mohanty (1991) and Minh-ha (1988) is much more useful in illuminating how such processes of production have formed an integral part of some Western feminist writers' thought, and the oppressive relationships of power between women themselves that are conceptualised within such thought.