Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

GOLDSMITHS Research Online
Article

Jones, Kevin and Skaife, Sally

Under the Cobblestones: Politics and Possibilities of the Art Therapy Large Group.

You may cite this version as: Jones, Kevin and Skaife, Sally. 2009. Under the Cobblestones: Politics and Possibilities of the Art Therapy Large Group. Politics and Psychotherapy International. , 7(1), pp. 18-27. [Article] : Goldsmiths Research Online.

Available at: http://eprints.gold.ac.uk/4159/

Under the Cobblestones, The Beach: The Politics and Possibilities of the Art Therapy Large Group

KEVIN JONES, Goldsmiths, University of London
SALLY SKAIFE, Goldsmiths, University of London

ABSTRACT *This paper discusses the politics and possibilities of linking the personal and political with therapeutic and social transformation through a teaching method provided in the art therapy training at Goldsmiths – the art therapy large group (ATLG). Three key ideas of May '68 are related to the ATLG and their relevance to other psychotherapies and psychotherapy trainings is considered. These ideas are: the importance of the 'capitalist' university as an essential terrain in the struggle for social change; the Atelier Populaire's use of art in an anti-capitalist critique of the commodification of art and artist in society, and the anti-imperialist character of the May events. These ideas are related to the theoretical base of the ATLG in the large verbal group literature, Performance Art and to the wide international membership of the ATLG, creating a forum for engaging with global issues. To illustrate these points, we give an example of the interface of the political and the impact of a real event – the university lecturers' strike in 2006 – and the learning that took place in relation to this through the ATLG. We conclude that through a critical engagement with the university within the global terrain of contemporary neoliberalism, the ATLG provides a territory that can integrate the political and therapeutic in arts / psychotherapy trainings; provide a critique and alternative to the commodification of art and artist and engage with issues of difference in the globalized market place. The ATLG prepares the artist / student / therapist / worker to critically engage in the personal and social transformation of the politics of art and psychotherapy provision in the public, private and voluntary sectors. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Key words: art therapy, large group, May '68, performance art

'Under the cobblestones...' was a piece of wall graffiti made in Paris in May '68, which represented the May events as a moment of political and social transformation: if you ripped up the cobblestones the possibility of a transformed social order opened beneath. The 2008 May anniversary conference asked what we can learn from May '68 about the possibilities for linking the personal and the political with therapeutic and social transformation. Influenced ourselves by the politics of May '68, we discuss the possibilities for linking the political and the therapeutic in a teaching method provided on an art therapy training at Goldsmiths, the art therapy large group. The paper considers how the bringing together of education, art and politics, students and workers in May '68, has relevance both to the art therapy large group and to other psychotherapies in their relation to social transformation.

We identify three aspects of the politics of May '68 that have relevance for the art therapy large group and to other psychotherapies: the critique of the 'capitalist' university as an essential terrain in the struggle for social change (Feenberg and Freedman, 2001, 76) with its link between the demands of students and the wider social struggles of workers under capitalism; the critique of the role of art and artist in capitalist society posed by the Atelier Populaire; and the anti-imperialist and international dimension of the May events. These are discussed in relation, firstly, to performance art with its ethics of participation, its site-specific nature, social critique and development within universities and, secondly, to the large verbal group literature, particularly the dynamics of creativity and destruction in large groups in relation to psychotherapy and social transformation; finally to issues of difference as they arise in relation to the international membership of ATLG.

To illustrate these points, we give an example of the interface of the political and the impact of a real event, the university lecturers' strike in 2006 and the learning that took place in relations to this through the art therapy large group.

UNIVERSITY BOURGEOISIE NON!! UNIVERSITY POPULAIRE OUI!! (Atelier Populaire, http://expositions.bnf.fr/utopie/feuill/feuille5/findex1.htm, accessed 10 November 2008)

The May events in Paris were sparked when student occupation of the Latin Quarter of Paris brought about violent police repression (Feenberg and Freedman, 2001, 23), resulting in a massive public demonstration in support of the students and a general strike throughout France. A series of university occupations by students and factory occupations by workers followed.

Seidman describes how, when occupying the Sorbonne, students called for a 'workers' as opposed to a 'capitalist' university (Seidman, 2004, 127). The 'University Populaire' criticized an examination systems linked to hierarchical and undemocratic social relations of power and denounced research, teaching and science that produced knowledge driven by the needs of capitalist economic development and the market. In understanding the role of the university in the general relations of capitalist production and consumption, Feenberg and Freedman relate how the students saw the university as an 'essential terrain' in the struggle for a new society (Feenberg and Freedman, 2001, 76). Students emphasized their struggle against the class character of society and linked the problems they faced to broader worker struggles over self-management and wages.

THE RETURN TO NORMAL (Atelier Populaire, Anon, Seidman, 2004, 125)

The hoped-for break with capitalism did not occur. The university is now part of a social terrain dominated by a globalized neoliberal capitalism whose features are the micro-management and regulation of education in which knowledge is seen as information and a commodity (Levidow, 2005, 156). The exam system, seen in May '68 as a central link between the undemocratic social hierarchies and educational elitism of the university and an undemocratic society driven by the market, is firmly in place. Where students in May 68 fought against the integration of the university with 'technocratic capitalism', current higher education policy looks to a deepening of integration between the needs of industry, teaching and research.

For example, the logic of underfunding in universities creates pressure to teach more students for shorter periods, which has implications for teaching students to learn more than brief therapy interventions. Current proposals for future university Research and Assessment Exercises (RAE) could lead to the dominance of research methods and agendas and prescriptive teaching of therapeutic models orientated to the aims of industry and the public sector.

Art psychotherapy, as a state-regulated profession, is ever more tightly integrated into these processes. With an increasing tendency for psychotherapy trainings to seek validation from universities and the looming possibility of state regulation of psychotherapy, the political analysis of the university is as relevant as it was in May '68.

PEOPLE'S STUDIO: YES. BOURGEOIS STUDIO: NO (Feenberg and Freedman, 2001, 142)

The occupation of the Sorbonne was paralleled by the occupation of the college of the Beaux Arts, which was renamed the 'Atelier Populaire' by artists and students who led the occupation. Feenberg and Freedman describe how the Atelier artists explicitly described their struggle as being against the 'class university', which was inextricably linked to the broader struggle of the working class against capitalism (Feenberg and Freedman, 2001, 26). Seidman describes how the Atelier opened its studios to collaboration with demonstrators, students and workers in the production of numerous posters, which evolved in relation to the events as they were happening and which quickly became a central aspect of the May experience. The posters were produced collectively and anonymously, taking art out of the gallery and into the street.

Seidman and Feenberg and Freedman all describe how the Atelier provided a critique of the commodification of art and artists in society (Seidman, 2004, 132). Art psychotherapy similarly stresses process and the agency of the art work rather than its market value and small art psychotherapy group theory describes art as a social production (Waller, 1993; Skaife and Huet, 1998; McNeilly, 2006).

However, the contradictions of the artist's role in the terrain of neoliberalism are also reflected at Goldsmiths. Whilst training artist / therapists to make interventions with marginalized social groups in the public and voluntary sectors in the art psychotherapy training, Goldsmiths also has several famous former visual arts graduates who embrace the link between art, celebrity culture and the market, for example Damien Hirst, who recently sold

a record £111 million worth of his art at auction; this in the context of the recent world financial crisis, 'the credit crunch'.

CREATE TWO, THREE MANY VIETNAMS (Guevara, 1967 http://marxistleninist.wordpress.com/2008/10/09/che-guevara-create-two-three-many-vietnams/, accessed 10 November 2008)

The May events were not confined to Paris; rather they were part of a worldwide eruption of struggle: revolutionary movements in South America and Vietnam, the crisis of Stalinism in Eastern Europe and 'the Prague Spring', widespread opposition to the Vietnam war, the civil rights movement in America and student protests in Britain, Germany, Mexico and Japan. Ross (2002) describes how the explicit anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist politics of the May events brought the presence of the anti-colonialist militant to the fore.

Where the internationalism of May 68 was founded in militancy, internationalism at Goldsmiths is a result of globalization and economic migration. The membership of the art therapy large group described here included students and staff from Eastern and Western Europe, Iceland, Scandinavia, the Middle East, South Africa, South East Asia, America, Canada and South America. Many were experienced in professional and political organization within the labour and trade union movement, within feminist, queer, anti-racist and environmental campaigns. The large art therapy group provides an opportunity for its members to find a role as artists/therapists in the context of different socially and politically located art histories and therapeutic traditions.

THE ROLE OF PERFORMANCE ART

In the art therapy large group art becomes more obviously performance and the work of Performance Artists therefore relevant. Performance artists were active during May '68 and the theoretical tradition of performance art reflects a number of ethical and political preoccupations relevant to the clinical practice and social context of psychotherapy.

There are many traditions within psychotherapy that emphasize the ethical importance of seeing the therapeutic relationship as involving mutual relations of power and influence (Gordon, 1999). In performance art meaning arises in the interaction between performer, performance and spectator and the emphasis is on this process of interaction rather than the production of an art object. This involves a deliberate ethical stance, which has at its heart the idea of changing the audience/artist relationship from one of passive spectatorship and consumption to active participation through witness or action.

Through participation in the art therapy large group as either performer or spectator, students learn about the performances that take place on a smaller scale in both the small group and individual art therapy. The meaning of a performance work is also specific to the particular site in which it takes place, as is illustrated in the later art therapy large group example.

The performance ethics of active engagement provides a direct link to the politics of De Board and the Situationists, an influential group during the Parisian May events. With their performance interventions into the street demonstrations they aimed to challenge the citizens of the 'society of the spectacle', those who passively consumed culture rather

than contributing to it (De Board, 1995). Historically performance has linked art and political change, ranging from Dadaist anarchism and the explicit socialism of the Bauhaus and Russian constructivism, to support for anti-war, feminist and gay liberation movements (Goldberg, 1979). In response to the contemporary pressures of globalization, the performance space is increasingly seen as a potential site of black liberation struggle (hooks, 1995) and overt opposition and resistance to global capitalism (Schechner, 2003).

Universities and art colleges have been important for the development of performance – for example, the Bauhaus in the Weimar republic in Germany; Black Mountain College in the USA; the work of Joseph Beuys at Düsseldorf University in Germany. In these educational institutions, hierarchies between different art practices and interdisciplinary boundaries were challenged and an art teaching evolved that emphasized the self-development of the human being rather than the reified role of artist.

Goldsmiths continues these traditions as an educational institution that supports the large group enabling relationships between clients and their art work, the art and the group, the relationship of the group and art to society, to be questioned.

LARGE VERBAL GROUP THEORY

Performance artists brought art to new social contexts out of the conventional gallery system and art market. Similarly large groups, as a new form of 'talking cure' were introduced to shell shocked soldiers during World War 2 and afterwards in the new social context of the NHS. However, post-1968 the large group came to be seen as an aspect of group analytic training and as a broader therapeutic arena that could bridge the gap between the personal and the wider cultural and political context (De Mare et al., 1991; Thompson, 1999).

De Mare et al. describe how the frustration of intimacy in the large group leads to feelings of hatred, which can lead to the formation of warring subgroups as individuals try to find a way of dealing with this hatred. The aim of the large group was the transformation of hate through dialogue and lateral affiliation between groups depending upon recognition of difference (De Mare et al., 1991).

These processes are mirrored in the art therapy large group through the process of making a mark and finding a voice: through the struggle with alienation and fragmentation, students can move to active agency and recognition within the whole course context, providing them with the skills to survive the group and survive within institutions. The literature describes a transition from states of split fragmentation to depressive cohesion (Skynner, 1975), disconnectedness to connectedness (Wilke, 2003) or the interplay between creation and destruction (Nitsun, 1996). In the art therapy large group the transition between these states is made through art and dialogue, which involves the whole body and senses in movement and reflection.

Hopper describes the large group as a place where trauma, for example, the experience of racism, unemployment or war, is revisited in the traumatic experience of the group itself (Hopper, 2003). The assumption was that if large-group dynamics resemble the dynamics of institutions and larger social units, then learning from the large groups holds the hope of a role for psychotherapeutic intervention in the transformation and humanization of society (Thompson, 1999).

THE ART THERAPY LARGE GROUP AT GOLDSMITHS

The art therapy large group has approximately 80 or more members, including all the students on the course and all of the staff team. The group meets twice a term for an hour-and-a-half per session, giving six sessions per academic year in all. Chairs are formed in a circle around the edge of a large carpeted room. Art materials are available in large crates on the floor in the middle of the room. The nine members of the staff team act as facilitators. The purpose of the art therapy large group is to teach students about art therapy processes, which become magnified in the large group context, and to consider the existential, political and social issues that are raised in becoming a professional art therapist.

Drawing on both psychoanalytic thinking and the group analytic tradition, the MA in art psychotherapy at Goldsmiths is structured and conceived according to systems theory (Agazarian and Peter, 1981). Learning is understood as happening through the interrelationship of clinical work, theoretical studies and experiential learning. These are brought together in college in interacting small supervision groups and experiential art therapy groups, which are held within the year group, and then within the whole programme group. This programme group then interfaces with the educational institution, clinical institutions and their larger structures, for example Higher Education and the NHS.

GROUP EXAMPLE AND THE STRIKE

The example is taken from two groups at the end of the academic year 2006/7. This account is limited to the personal viewpoints of the two authors taken from two particular places in the group.

Prior to and during the sessions described, art therapy staff were involved in a national union dispute over pay and along with other university lecturers were not marking work that led to progression on their courses or the award of a final mark leading to graduation. The dispute raised general issues of low university pay and the marketization of public services that would adversely affect the quality of art psychotherapy education and the wider profession in the future. The strike highlighted a broader struggle over the profession, its status and recognition within society.

In the first group, students raised anxieties about graduation and the continuing strike. A game of hopscotch was created and different cultural variations on the game were discussed and then added to the game as it was played, one version of which either passed through or ended in heaven or hell. The game highlighted and allowed discussion of the global diversity of cultural experience in the group. It suggested themes of winners and losers among staff and students, which could have referred to the anxieties about the outcome of the strike.

The second session, which was the last in the academic year, took place in the main college hall for the first time, an extremely large room that actually dwarfed the 80+ members of the large group. Amongst other things, the hall was also used for graduation ceremonies.

In the pre-group staff meeting differences were acknowledged between staff over the financial implications of a reduction of hours for those on short-term contracts. The subject of persecutors and victims arose and we left for the group holding these difficult feelings.

There was a flurry of art making and activity with little talking in the first 45 minutes. A number of figures had been made including a large, flat paper cut-out figure, which lay on the floor, and a sculpture made from a lectern draped in clothes. A female student began to make rolls of paper, which, after she had laid them out on the tiered benches on the stage, looked like graduation certificates. A female staff member moved a chair into the centre of the stage. The paper rolls were now taken up and put by the paper cut out and then later 'given' to the chair. A student made a placard with the message 'The End is Neigh'. She walked very fast around the inside of the circle, holding the placard aloft and then went into the centre of the circle where she knelt, bent over double with her face hidden, for some time.

A male member of staff, feeling increasingly concerned about the student in the centre, expressed his concern and discomfort and linked this to the 'Neigh'. He thought this could be construed as 'the end is Nay', the course will not finish because no one can graduate. There was silence and then more activity. After a while the student in the centre sat up and said that the placard did refer to the end of the year, but not to the possibility of not finishing. Some students then complained about the silence being broken. When a different male member of staff interpreted these comments an argument started between him and the complaining students. The argument developed like a boxing match that was both aggressive and humorous, a performance that seemed to enact tensions in the group.

Toward the end, a student took the lectern figure apart and laid it down on the floor. He said that he was leaving this year and that he would miss the group. A staff member said that he would miss him too. Other students asked if the staff member would miss people who had not made any comments. In the meantime someone had put a shawl over the lectern figure now lying on the floor. These acts seemed to visibly resolve the charged atmosphere in the room.

In the staff post-group some had enjoyed the large space in the main hall, the sense of being at the centre of the college and there was a general excitement and pleasure in the extended use of the art materials. Divisions suddenly erupted again around the question of whether or not we had needed to verbalize in the group. The split quickly became gendered and the polarized feelings from the pre-group and the conflict in the large group emerged again. Like the boxing match in the group, this seemed to be a necessary process, holding the very uncomfortable dynamics with which we were all involved.

DISCUSSION

The example illustrates an activity on the boundary between the education of the students and an external political event. Themes connected to the external event had arisen in other groups on the course but were played out and represented in the art therapy large group through the use of art, play and dialogue, which was witnessed by the whole course group. In the first group the international character of the student body was performed through the game of hopscotch. Issues of cultural agency, identity and power within the context of a Western European therapeutic training were contested and enacted.

In the second group the possession, giving, taking or refusal of power among staff and students was also played out around the paper cut-out and lectern figures. The writing on

the placard acted as a hinge point for the transition from visual to verbal representation, a disjunction that brought out an enactment of conflict. The tension between the art making and the talk illustrated differentials of power between staff and students in which gender seemed to be implicated. These tensions were then also played out in the post staff group.

The movement between the split and conflicted state into the depressive moment of creativity (Skynner, 1975) was illustrated in the action of the students with the paper cut-out and lectern figures. The laying down of the lectern figure by the male student and the female student draping the paper cut-out figure put the conflicts around power, which threatened the group, to rest. This resolution allowed an ordinary, face-to-face acknowledgement of leaving the course to be expressed, with a feeling of sadness marking the transition in the group from disconnection to connection.

The experiential containment in the art therapy large group of the mixed feelings of anger, envy and sympathy about the strike allowed thinking and learning in other more didactic teaching contexts on the course. Discussion in business meetings connected students to support from the National Union of Students and a new sense of the place of the course in the wider college. Working with the staff, some students published their own account of the strike in the newsletter of the professional association. This learning may also have empowered students to organize among themselves to mount a challenge to the college in a different context the following year.

The experiential learning of the art therapy large group, when, linked to learning in the interrelated course context, helped students gain a new understanding of their political agency and about the power of acting collectively to represent their interests, in a way that is effective and relevant to future activity in their professional organizations and trade unions.

CONCLUSION: IN THE SHADOW OF THE NEW WORLD DISORDER

In May '68 the personal and political was linked to social transformation through the overthrow of capitalist social relations by the international action of students, workers and anti-imperialist struggle. Representing and perpetuating the dominant values of an unequal society, the university was an essential terrain in this struggle. What are the politics and possibilities of the art therapy large group in relation to personal and social transformation in the global terrain of the New World Disorder?

Striking Renault workers in '68 called for workers self management of the factories but the strike action of the University College Union described here was a struggle limited to demands over pay, not workers self management or the transformation of social relations based on class. Students in May 68 critiqued the role of university examinations, research and teaching in the regulation of an educational system organised for the benefit of a class society based on inequality. The art therapy large group exists within an educational context dominated by the market and a professional context of state regulation, reflecting a new configuration of class relations. It can however, by setting individual action in a group and social context, question the links between professional power and the provision of services in the public sector, politics and society. Within the limited horizons provided by the terrain of contemporary neoliberalism, students learn the possibilities for the transformative work

of clinical practice both in and against the institutions and society within which they work.

The Atelier Populaire demonstrated a critique of the commodification of art and artist in capitalist society. The art produced in the art therapy large group, through its emphasis on the relationship between audience, performer and site, highlighted the dynamic effects on the course of the impact of the external event of the strike. By setting the production of art in a social and political framework, the art therapy large group offers a site of resistance to market dominated art, education and therapeutic practices. Art therapy at Goldsmiths provides an alternative social role for the artist/therapist that is the other side to the celebrity and commodity art of Damian Hirst.

The action short of a strike by university lecturers was a far cry from the anti-imperialist struggle of May 68 but was a response to neoliberal education policies that are shaping education on an international scale. The student learning on political agency described here is the same as which drove South African students in 2004 to struggle against forced marketization of their education systems (Levidow, 2005), and Parisian students to organize against cuts in their education system during the same months of the action at Goldsmiths. The art therapy large group is an international arena that can teach a form of psychotherapy, which aims to empower its participants through their active engagement in making a mark and finding a voice, in a boundaried and therefore meaningful social arena. Through an engagement with multiple questions of difference, for example between year groups, modes of communication, between class, sexualities, ethnicities and national identities, the art therapy large group is a place in which the political systems that define and confine us are critiqued.

The art therapy large group links the personal and the political through the ethics of participation found in performance and large group theory and recognizes the key role of the witness/participant in the life of large and other social groups. For students in May '68 breaking down academic and social hierarchies was a political question linked to broader social transformation. The influence of May 68, performance art and large verbal group theory have provided a set of 'lateral affiliations' (De Mare et al., 1991) for the art therapy large group. This suggests a model of interdisciplinary learning that could integrate questions of therapeutic and social transformation into the training of arts and other psychotherapists, raising questions about the possibilities for transformation between different therapeutic traditions.

In May 2008 the cobblestones and the beach are buried under asphalt and the possibilities for social transformation fall under the shadow of neo liberalism cast by the financial and military threat of the New World Disorder. Within the globalized space of international capitalism, the art therapy large group at Goldsmiths holds open a small space within which it is possible to engage with the politics of arts and psychotherapy training, therapeutic and social change. It prepares the artist/student/therapist/worker to engage critically in the personal and social transformation of the politics of art and psychotherapy provision in the public, private and voluntary sectors. In relation to May '68, it is also a permanent reminder to be ready to go out onto the streets when that kind of moment arises again.

REFERENCES

Agazarian Y, Peter R. The Visible and Invisible Group: Two Perspectives on Group Therapy and Group Process. London: Tavistock/Routledge, 1981.

De Board G. The Society of the Spectacle. New York: Zone Books, 1995.

De Mare P, Piper R, Thompson S. Koinonia: From Hate through Dialogue to Culture in the Large Group. London: Karnac, 1991.

Feenberg A, Freedman, J. When Poetry Ruled the Streets: The French May Events of 1968. New York: State University of New York Press, 2001.

Goldberg R. Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present. London: Thames & Hudson, 1979.

Gordon P. Face to Face: Therapy as Ethics. London: Constable, 1999.

hooks b. Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition. In: Ugwu C (ed.) Let's Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance. Seattle: Bay Press, 1995; 210–21.

Hopper E. Incohesion: Aggregation / massification. The fourth basic assumption: the unconscious life of groups and group like social systems. In Lipgar RM. Pines M (eds) Building on Bion: Roots. London: Jessica Kingsley, 2003; 202–29.

Levidow L. Neoliberal agendas for higher education. In Saad-Filho A, Johnston D (eds) Neoliberalism: A Critical reader. London: Pluto, 2005; 156–63.

McNeilly G. (2006) Group Analytic Art Therapy. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Nitsun M. The Anti-Group. Destructive Forces in the Group and their Creative Potential. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

Ross K. May '68 and its Afterlives. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Schechner R. Performance Studies: An Introduction. Oxford: Routledge, 2002.

Seidman M. The Imaginary Revolution: Parisian Students and Workers in 1968. New York: Berghahn Books, 2004.

Skaife S, Huet V(eds.) Art Psychotherapy Groups: Between Pictures and Words. London: Routledge, 1998.

Skynner R. (1975) The Large Group in Training. In: Kreeger L (ed.) The Large Group: Dynamics and Therapy. London: Karnac, 1975. 227–52.

Thompson S. The Group Context. London: Jessica Kingsley, 1999.

Waller D. Interactive Group Art Therapy. London: Routledge, 1993.

Wilke G. Chaos and Order in the Large Group. In Schneider S, Weinberg H (eds) The Large Group Revisited. London: Jessica Kingsley, 2003; 86–98.