

Drawing the group: a visual exploration of a therapeutic space online

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Introduction

Drawing can be a means of discovery, a way of working something out. I turned to drawing in my practice as an art therapist facilitating a therapeutic art group that had moved online during the Covid-19 pandemic. Examined here, the drawings I made in the group can be seen as a record of this time as we felt and stumbled our way into being together online, amidst existential fears and acute states of mind brought on by the pandemic. In drawing, I first sought out the humanness of the group in loose semi-abstracted portraits, which then developed into complex interconnected networks and doodle-like structures as I started to develop a visual language for my experience of the group. Pencil on paper anchored me in our new digital life adrift online, as we grappled with conflict, connection, and desire for relatedness. Drawing was more than a reflection of the nature of our group, it played an active and embodied part in my understanding of it, and my learning to work as a therapist in this new context.

The chapter sets out a series of these drawings, all of which I made while facilitating the group, which was for adults experiencing mental health difficulties. My drawings, accompanied by my written diary account of making each one in the group, are a form of art-based enquiry; a subjective and reflexive exploration of our relating as a group, in an unfamiliar online space, as the pandemic progressed. In making images, and finding meaning in the process, I brought my aesthetic sense as an artist and my psychodynamic training as an

art therapist. My investigation sits within an area of art therapy practice and research whereby art therapists make their own artwork as part of their role facilitating art therapy groups, alongside service users who are also engaged in their own separate artmaking. Art therapists often then reflect on their own artwork as an additional way of gathering insights about the therapeutic process (Fish 2012; Mahony 2011; Nash 2020).

Prior to moving online, our group existed as part of a therapeutic studio set up for adults with complex enduring mental health difficulties and was attended by a consistent group of long-term members. The ethos of the studio is based in ideas of therapeutic community, and equality in interactions is sought between staff and service users. There is a shared focus on artistic endeavour and finding meaning in life through art and it is an established part of the culture that the art therapists who facilitate the groups are also artists and will make their own artwork alongside service users. When the pandemic struck and we moved online, I had a question in my mind as to how it would be possible to make art while facilitating an online group. Set up using video conferencing software 'Zoom', this was, at the time, a new and unfamiliar digital space for me and the group, born out of the restrictions of a government mandated 'lockdown'. In a deeper way, I was also curious about how my artwork created in this group might respond to the context it was made in and reflect some of our group experience amidst the real and existential anxiety of a global pandemic.

The chapter takes the following structure. First, I contextualise my research with some examples of art therapy literature that informed my practice and approach to this writing, followed by background to the therapeutic group. The main part of the chapter is made up of examples of my drawings (eight selected from a total of nineteen), along with written

accounts of their making in the group based on my diary entries from the time. These are accompanied by reflective passages written with hindsight.

Art therapy literature: a framework for understanding

Situating my art-based exploration within art therapy literature provides a framework for understanding the potential meanings, and usefulness, of my drawings in my particular context. Art therapists have long believed that making art can provide access to interior life and become a way of gaining intimate self-knowledge and knowledge of relationships with others and, although much simplified, this can be seen as the premise of the way psychodynamically informed art therapy has been conceptualised (Schaverien 1992). Of particular relevance for this chapter are a growing number of art therapists who also use their own artwork made in response to clients, as a method to gain insight on therapeutic processes and to reflect on the thoughts and feelings of both client and therapist.

Fish (2012) brings together much of the thinking around this practice and builds on the work of earlier art therapist accounts of art making used in service of professional processing; Wadeson 2003, for example, who points out that previously unconscious dynamics of the therapeutic relationship will appear in the image of the art therapist and can then be recognised and thought about. Fish suggests this type of making art can be seen as ‘response art’: ‘Response art is artwork created by art therapists in response to material that arises in their therapy work. Art therapists use response art to contain difficult material, express and examine their experiences, and share their experiences with others.’ (2012 p. 138). Fish (2012) and Nash (2020) observe that therapists can make art before, during, or after sessions with clients and that these artworks can be used to reflect on aspects of the clinical work, for

example, Nash's study concentrated on the insights gained from work made directly after clinical sessions. One of Nash's findings was that reflecting on the therapist's imagery systematically between sessions 'deepens understanding, encourages curiosity and builds empathy', as well as gaining clinical distance and allowing a wider perspective on the work (2020 p.46).

Across the literature I found work made *during* sessions with service users was often made in more informal studio type sessions, for example, Allen (1995), Marshall-Tierney (2014), Mahoney (2011), Moon (2002), , Omand and McMahon (2022). In the settings these authors describe, there are other more immediate reasons why the therapist might make art in sessions; for example, to model creative processes, to encourage a relaxed less clinical culture, to lessen the power imbalance between staff and service users, or to embody a dual identity as artist. Nonetheless, despite the therapist's artwork not always being made primarily as 'response art' (Fish 2012, Nash 2020), all the above authors (IBID) acknowledge that their art in some way reflects the situation it is made in and have drawn insights from reflecting on their work afterwards. Marshall Tierney (2014) describes his art as coming into existence in the intersubjective space between him and the service users in his group. This seemed, to me, to be at the heart of how my drawings, which came into being somewhere between me and the group, can be understood as meaningful in relation to the therapeutic space.

What I didn't find in this literature were examples of art therapists' artwork as an overt reflection of group dynamics or the group as a whole. This may be because art therapists who make artwork in group sessions tend to do it within studio type groups, which traditionally are loose informal groups where the focus is not on group dynamics. For example, Marshall

Tierny (2014) describes his studio group as attended by a succession of individuals or pairs and the interactions around his artwork are described in relation to these encounters. An exception is Mahoney (2011), who took her own artwork, made over a long period in her studio group for out-patients, and examined it retrospectively in an exhibition with group members' artworks to visually research the relationships in her group. She discovered complex dynamics between herself and group members and gradual changes in artwork processes over time. I was left curious about whether individual artworks might reflect particular sessions, which is not described. Other gaps I identified across this literature were the context of online working, and whether artworks made with clients might also reflect the wider social context of the clinical work, in my case the pandemic.

The art therapist Shawn McNiff (2018) specifically identified the practices I have described above as forms of artistic inquiry whereby researchers utilise making art as a primary form of investigation, and so linked art therapists' practice to a wider body of arts-based research simultaneously developing across other disciplinary fields (Leavy 2020). There is not enough space to explore these here but a notable example, which introduces thinking around group processes and image making, is by group analyst Sapochnik. Sapochnik brings an ethnographic frame to his image-making method, which he used with organisational consultants. This involved drawing after observing a group and subsequently bringing the drawings to a processing group to discuss. He suggests that tacit knowledge may be elicited but it is more likely to come from the drawing process itself rather than be fixed in the image; 'the drawing functions as a representation of the situation observed, but also of the internal space of the observer and the impact of one on the other.' p168. He concludes that the practice of drawing, 'through its digestive and performative functions, disrupts rigid reasoning and assists mourning the impossibility of certainty.' P 176.

Method

Although I did not know at the time of making that I would write about my artwork in a formalised way, I was systematic in my approach to making and writing. I aimed to produce one drawing in each group and, post session, I wrote about my experience making them. I include 8 drawings as exemplars out of a total of 19 that I made in over the group's lifespan of 4 months. The written accounts formed a type of process journal, a personal creative endeavour made to process my thoughts and feelings in this new and unusual virtual context, rather than an official organisational document. I was influenced by art therapist Cavaliero's (2021) creative writing on her drawing whilst she lay ill with COVID_19, in which she presented her drawings of landscapes chronologically with detailed accounts of their making and her feelings and anxieties during her recovery. I used informal and directly expressive writing and found this congruent in reflecting the subjective nature of the work and the unknowns and ambiguities that permeated it (Barone and Eisner 1997).

Recording my own reactions and feelings as a therapist and reflecting on them seems to link to the concept in research of reflexivity, as an attribute involving noticing one's responses as a researcher. The principle of authenticity also feeds into this as part of a wider tradition of constructive qualitative research. Authenticity is evident through reflexivity about our individual personal background, interests and values that result in fair depictions (Patton 2002, cited in Chilton and Leavy 2014, p 22). There are many complex ways in which my identity and worldview will influence my work. Just one example is that as a therapist coming from a particular model of working, I was conscious of a wish to portray the group

work and our approach as being useful. Examining this critically, I resolved to set out what didn't go well as well as what did.

I sought permission from group members to include basic anonymised descriptions of the group atmosphere (taken from my diary) to provide the context for my drawings. My focus is on my role as a therapist and how I can understand my drawings in relation to our group as a whole and the wider social context. I have therefore not given pseudonyms to group members nor tracked individuals' progress over time. This would be straying into 'case study' territory and would need further ethical consideration and active involvement from members. There is, of course, a loss in not hearing more about the group members individually, for whom I have great regard. To include their artwork and retrospective reflections was beyond my scope here but it would be an interesting expansion of the research.

Background to the group

The therapeutic group I made my drawings in was 'virtual', but this does not mean the group existed in 'thin air'. On the contrary it emerged out of a rich embodied organisational context with its own culture and ethos that had developed over a good many years. The studio where we worked previously is a crowded but stimulating space, overflowing with art materials and old artworks, and a 'lifeline' to many who are isolated or distressed. People are referred there with complex enduring mental health problems. often having been in the mental health system for many years, struggling with experiences of psychosis, trauma, or longstanding difficulties in relationships with others. The ethos of the service was born out of the principles of therapeutic communities where equality in interactions was sought between staff and group members, who have a say in how things are run.

The studio group that I co-facilitate with a colleague is made up of a regular number of long-term members. Within the timeframe people are free to stay as long or as short a time as they wish and to come and go. People make tea, talk or wander around the studio for a break. These flexible boundaries are common in studio based, open group approaches to working and they mean that the service is accessible for those who might find more formal psychoanalytically based groups off putting, or too difficult to stay with. Group members are self-directed and work on their own projects at their own pace, and therapists pursue their own artwork alongside. Even with a relaxed atmosphere and the many helpful relationships that spring up, the studio is not always easy for people, involving the conflict of encountering others, and arguments and raised voices are not uncommon although hopefully issues can be resolved or tolerated. This organisational context informed our decisions when we went on to set up the virtual group, and we wondered how this history would translate online.

The pandemic arrives

Along with much of the world I had followed the progress of the COVID_19 pandemic as it moved across the globe, yet it was a shock when the ‘lockdown’ was finally announced in the UK. We were plunged into uncertainty when the studio, along with many global societies, had to shut down for the foreseeable future when emergency social distancing measures became mandatory. Like much of the population, the studio community was suddenly in the previously unfathomable position of having to ‘move online’. The existential feeling of threat, and the disruption to daily life felt surreal and lent a ‘shared’ ness to this early stage, both studio members and the staff were in shock, like much of the UK and wider world.

It became clear that the service needed to provide remote support of some kind and we discussed this in our supervision and with group members. We decided to trial setting up

online groups, using the video conferencing software Zoom, for the regular groups who came on each day. Myself and my co-therapist planned a pilot session first for an hour, with the intention of developing it according to feedback from group members. We sent the link out with it a few guidelines and technical instructions (how to set up, choosing where to sit and what the background to our zoom window might show).

Many members of the studio struggled with being in a group and with others. They may well have avoided groups for much of their lives which was why the informal open studio style group suited them. We were aware from the start that an online group would feel very different and imagined it would be challenging for many. In addition, we offered regular telephone calls to support individuals in addition to the group, although we hoped the group itself would become a supportive space. After discussion we chose not to introduce a new structure in the group; we would not have a set time for talking about the work and people could continue to drop in and talk, make work, drink tea as they pleased. We let people know they could join for as long or short a time as they wished, to reflect the flexible studio attitude. We hoped in this way, like the old studio, it would keep an informality. We had many questions as therapists. Can one just 'be' in a space online? Without the containing space of the room would we the therapists need to do more as group facilitators to help people feel safe enough to participate?

The majority of studio members chose to take part in the online group, around 10, although a core of around seven came regularly. The group was mixed in aspects of age, gender, sexuality and socio-economic background, with some diversity in race but not as much as in other aspects, the majority of the group, myself and my co-therapist being white. Most group members had known each other for several years in the studio, the newest member having

joined over a year before, so there was much familiarity between group members. It was in this context that we moved online. I now turn to my drawings and accounts of their making.

Drawing in fragmentation: disconnection and the unknown

Account of drawing in group 1

I open the Zoom window with trepidation. I am immediately joined by two quieter members of the group and experience a momentary shock of seeing into their rooms. The intimacy feels palpable and potentially somewhat intrusive, and yet we all seem tiny and far away in our separate boxes. Nonetheless there is pleasure in seeing familiar faces after several weeks away from the studio. After a few greetings we settle into silence. One member begins sewing and the other lies on a sofa using her I-pad. Another arrives and sits far away from the camera, across the room with a small notebook, I cannot read his expression.

Feeling under resourced I pull paper and pencil towards me, I only have one sheet and an HB pencil. My artwork in the studio had previously involved the inky pleasures of mono-printing on tissue paper, and making ceramic objects, now hardly possible. I have an idea of the virus like a snowstorm, filling the air between us. I begin to draw the spike proteins particles that have become familiar to me from news stories over the last two months. I haven't drawn for a while and I'm rusty. A stiff little drawing. In our 'remote working' we are remote. I see little scenes of people making art like rooms in a doll house. I miss the noises of the studio, the smell of oil paint and the sense of bodies in a room.

INSERT Figure 2.1 HERE

Figure 2.1. Pencil on A2 paper

The silence overrides me. We are sitting in the same virtual room, alone yet connected and I feel awkward in my navigation of this new space. Without the shared concrete walls, I feel adrift, I have no resources. Usually, the sense of place is vital: the studio full of things that invite action; the ceramics corner, the printing press, jars of brushes, the kettle waiting to be boiled for tea and stacks of CDs waiting to be played. On zoom I'm the 'host' providing, what? thin air? This is an inhibiting feeling online and I become aware of a 'lack'; what I can't provide and what we have lost – a loss.

My co-therapist joins the group after some technical difficulty, and another group member who talks and fills the space. I try to connect with quieter members but realise it is hard to reach out to individuals online without putting them on the spot. I long to be able to have a quiet exchange in the corner of the studio, simply not possible here. We show each other our artwork after a while. My drawing evokes a mixed response, one member thinks the virus is rather beautiful close up, another says, 'ugh horrible'. I start to feel perhaps my work is toxic and I have contaminated the space of the group with anxiety of the horrors outside. Someone tries to join the group and technology fails, we see her appear and disappear on screen several times, but we can't hear her microphone. She seems to be calling out to us which feels agonising. Another person leaves without saying goodbye and we are left wondering why. Was the experience too painful? The remaining group suggest that next week we extend the group time to two hours as the session hasn't felt long enough. We resolve to call back the disconnected member to resolve the problem for next week.

Account of group 2

Four more members have now been helped to access the technology to join for the first time. The group grew to ten people and quickly became exciting, noisy and chaotic with many of us inadvertently talking over each other. I was moved to see members with long standing friendships who hadn't seen each other for a while calling greetings to each other across the squares on the screen. There was also excitement at being able to see each other's pets for the first time: no less than five different cats appeared on screen, a dog, and a budgie that comically flew in and out of a zoom window to perch on a member's shoulder. There was a jubilant energy, with several people constantly speaking at once producing abrasive sound glitches. One member stood up and started wildly juggling objects. Someone shouted, 'WHY AM I SHOUTING?!' Another was positioned against a painted backdrop that read 'BOLLOCKS' and said they felt paranoid about a government conspiracy. Someone else told a story of being mugged by people in hospital masks. One woman said she felt anxious and wanted a theme, and another member suggested 'underwater'. I spotted family members in the background of two screens, something we later resolved to address. It was hard to hear, think and contain, and I found I could make no art at all.

At this point one person revealed she had been drawing the group as she saw them on screen and held up her picture to us. There was a pause as we looked and digested the image. I found seeing this reflection of ourselves as a group moving, and it seemed to produce a moment of calm. We talked about how it felt to be together on Zoom and the so called 'new normal' of social isolation sanctioned by the government. Some said they had always felt isolated, so it did not make much difference. One member said poignantly 'I feel like I have been preparing for this all my life'. Someone read a page from her diary in which she described seeing us all as 'little faces'. We talked about how it felt to be looked at and drawn.

Although members said they did not mind, this did raise the matter of privacy. The group decided they would ask each other's permission from now on.

After this session two members contacted us to complain that the group was too big and noisy and that they might not come again. In supervision we wondered if the group would work at all. Did we need more structure to help us contain the group; a check in time, themes, or time to talk about art? After discussion we decided it was too early to impose rules on the group. We agreed that it would take time for it to become the sort of group it was going to be - it didn't yet know. Instead, although uncomfortable, we decided to keep things open and talk to the group about the issues that had come up.

Reflecting on drawing 1 with hindsight, and its making in the group, it depicts a collection of fragments suspended. There are rare moments of collision, rather like our interactions in session 1 where I felt my comments missed their targets or might not have landed. The particles in this drawing are also like atoms, perhaps mirroring how we are atomised on screen in our separate zoom boxes, and in our separate homes, disconnected from each other but also tenuously in relationship. In the space between them there is absence of presence. They seem adrift, suggesting a lack of firm footing, or perhaps agency, that reflects back to me my feelings of powerlessness in this new space, where we could not prevent members from disconnecting, or the technology not working. Fragility and uncertainty permeated the group. With hindsight I also see drawing and journal writing as my wish as a therapist for what psychoanalyst Bion called 'containment' (1962) whereby unprocessed difficult and painful feelings and anxieties can be digested and thought about by an 'other' so that they become more manageable, originally a process that happened between baby and caregiver.

This was something particularly needed for group and therapist in a world flung upside-down by the pandemic.

In session two I felt unable to make artwork. There is not much writing about not making art in the art therapy literature. Here, I connect it with psychoanalyst Winnicott's (1971) ideas about what he termed 'potential space': the conditions in which play, experimentation can happen (1971). Winnicott drew many parallels between early childhood relationships and therapeutic processes. He suggested that if the caregiver's psychological holding of the child is 'good enough' (neither stiflingly perfect nor too absent and fragmented) then a 'potential space' in the presence of another, opens up for exploration and play, leading to symbolic thinking. Art therapists mostly think of this concept in terms of the client feeling able to experiment with art materials in the presence of the therapist, but here I suggest the anxiety of the overwhelming nature of the second group, and the unknowns of whether the online space would be holding enough, prevented me from being able to experience a potential space of sorts and experiment with art. I was to find in later groups that as I started to draw, my artwork 'held' me and let me discover freedom to explore the new space, and to hold the group with the confidence that online could be 'good enough'.

Drawing as relationship: negotiating self and other

Accounts of drawing in groups 3 and 4

These groups were large, with some absent members and two new members, but they felt calmer, with people arriving in dribs and drabs, asking each other how they were which created an informal check in. We asked how people were feeling about the group and

discussed some problems, without much resolution but it felt useful to have the difficulties now held in the group. In this more reflective atmosphere, one member said she had been feeling suicidal and others empathised; 'It's really hard at the moment isn't it'. We ascertain she would like us to contact her support worker for an extra visit. I felt what seemed to be the group's shared wish to reach out to each other.

In group 3, after my creative blankness the previous week I searched around for something that might inspire me to draw. I considered objects in my room and started some half-hearted outlines of items on my desk but felt that I was too taken away from the screen. The screen itself pulled me in and it was difficult to take my eyes off it, my brain working overtime to notice what was happening in the individual zoom boxes.

Two members sought the group's permission to draw the group, and, after some internal conflict, I also asked the group's permission to make a series of abstracted drawings of the group on screen (figure 2). I had been wrestling with the new potentials the online space offered and my curiosity as an artist, versus the reasons why one might not do this as a therapist; foremost in my mind was the implicit hierarchy of being 'staff' despite our more levelled-out ethos. Would members feel they could say no? I hoped so, as we have longstanding fairly transparent relationships, but I wrestle with my feelings at being in a different position to members. I also hesitate at the intimacy in focusing too long on any one person's square. This seemed to me to be like the therapist staring rudely at only one group member, an invasion of privacy and abuse of the power dynamic. The voyeuristic aspect of looking when the other does not know you are looking was present in my mind and I felt the potential intrusion of my gaze. In the event, one person declined to be drawn by anyone, and the rest of the group agreed.

INSERT FIGURE 2.2 HERE

Figure 2.2. Abstract group drawing 1, pencil on paper, 30 x 30 cm.

I say to the group that I won't be concentrating on individual faces, but it is hard not to be drawn in. I find them absorbing and fascinating. My pencil skittered over the paper, making lines and following angles and curves, never resting long on a specific person. Looking at and looking away; navigating the intrusion. If I don't look at the paper, I can keep looking at the group and keep the group 'in my mind's eye'. If I look down at my page, I can no longer see the group and I am transported back into my room, visually they cease to exist. If I stare too intently at one person, I lose a sense of the group as a whole. Glancing, marking, pausing, and working out what is possible in this new virtual screen space between myself, and group members. I return to the page randomly, and don't feel the images have to make sense. I practice drawing while looking at the screen and not at the page. It feels exciting to make marks and then discover what they look like when I break my gaze to look down at the page. We show each other our various portraits drawings and the group are engaged and curious. There seems to be a satisfaction and interest in feeling seen by each other.

In the following session I try more drawings (figure 3) continuing to keep my pencil on the paper unconsciously creating lines between us and we appear loosely connected by these threads. The online studio space feels tenuous with its lack of corporality and solid sense of holding, but I feel we have discovered something of potential, an absorbing tangible way into the online experience.

INSERT FIGURE 2.3 HERE

Figure 2.3. Abstract group drawing 2, pencil on paper, 30 x 30 cm.

The portrait drawings by myself and other group members seem to be part of a move to connect - to find each other in this new landscape. Our pencil strokes following the shapes of each other's faces and movements are a way of 'knowing' each other and getting closer. As I traced outlines, I actively come to know the presence of each individual in the group. We were isolated in an unprecedented social situation that required a language of its' own - 'social distancing', 'remote working' - we are looking for each other, is there anybody out there? Looking at each other on screen, making and sharing our own representations of this experience seems to make sense of it. The daunting and often 'cold' technology of video conferencing software, inhibiting at first, had made human connection possible and revealed our desire to find and connect with each other. The virtual space had become more known and tangible as drawing connected us in an embodied way to the experience, and to the group.

The drawings also show my unease at negotiating the ethical dilemma of permission amidst the hierarchy of holding a therapist position in the group. The intimacy in looking made me wary of the possibly intrusive dynamic of being in a position of power and drawing someone who might not wish to be drawn. If I found myself dwelling too long on a face, I sensed I had crossed my own boundaries and retreated. To find this boundary I had to experience coming up against it. I grappled with the dual positions of curious artist and responsible therapist that I held in our studio group, and with hindsight, I see this as part of the learning of this very particular time as we explored the new online space. Group members negotiated permissions well themselves and I was glad that one person felt her agency to decline. Of course, even

once permission is given, it is still possible to feel intruded upon. For other group members there was pleasure in being seen, and a sense of the group reflected back to itself. In these interactions the often-hidden nature of our looking and artmaking online required greater verbal transparency.

Drawing the group: a visual language

Account of drawing in groups 5 – 9

All members of the group are back again now, and telephone calls from myself and my co-therapist have supported absent members to give the group another try. I start a drawing on a large piece of paper with the idea of a map or journey. My beginning, of repetitive circles at the bottom of figure 4, reflects a certain tension I feel in the online space, an anxiety that feels tight and restricted. Rows appear like knitting, or chainmail and I feel a rigidity.

INSERT FIGURE 2.4 HERE

Figure 2.4. Pencil on A1 paper.

In session 5 the group notices an alien silence as planes and traffic have ceased in the city we live in. We share this phenomenon although our states of mind and life circumstances give this experience a plethora of different associations and meanings, from eerie anxiety to relief and joy in being able to hear bird song. A group member asks for a theme and inspired by someone's painting of a bird some of the group decide they will make work on the theme 'bird of paradise'. I'm struck by the fantastical nature of this, the idea of a paradise, and the imaginary drawings that appear, perhaps reflecting the unreal landscape we inhabit. This

group has a playful air with lots of laughter, group members were doing the talking and it feels as though it has become their group.

As the groups progress, I feel somewhat freer and the rows in my drawings dissolve and circles are free to untether from the formation and grow away. I start to enjoy the drawing as I'm starting to enjoy the groups. My mind is occupied, with a 'half in half out' feeling. The group talks about the legendary mole man of east London, who dug out earth from under his house to create a series of tunnel networks, which eventually made his house unstable. I notice the idea of making space and potential explorations, and perhaps a fear of whether the online space can 'support' this. The next few sessions felt as though a group culture was developing, and at the same time I was developing a way of drawing in the presence of the group. I focus on the group interactions while my hand makes its own dance across the paper.

In group 7 a thunderstorm hangs over the city. Excitingly we track it first in one person's window and then gradually in others as it travels over the city in deluges of rain, a reminder of our shared geography if not physical proximity. I respond to different pockets or threads of conversation, trying to 'track and trace' them with my lines. I record people reaching out to each other across the virtual space, like the arms of a creature or a spider spinning a disordered web. I show my drawing to the group. One member says she thinks it is 'a map of the emotions'. Another refers to artist Yayoi Kusama's infinity nets and her life in a psychiatric hospital which lead to a conversation about safety and containment, and to 'madness and normality' with one person saying: 'call me anything you like but please don't call me normal!' which made the whole group laugh.

As the group became more ‘group like’ and cohesive, I noticed I was responding to a sense of the group as a whole in my images and the drawings became more abstract, rather than me drawing individuals. This may reflect the changed way of working on Zoom, for example, in having to address the whole group rather than have individual conversations, that encourages a more conventional ‘group’ atmosphere, as opposed to an open studio. Visually, I can notice my own drawings loosen up and the marks are more fluid, breaking away from the regimented rows and armour like structures. Perhaps a sign I started to be able to ‘let go’ of my anxieties about whether the group would work online and began to find the online space enriching and sometimes enjoyable for the first time.

Figure 4 extended upwards and reads like a map of separate but related experiences across five sessions. With hindsight it is reminiscent of a map of mainland UK, and I wonder how much my obsession with watching the news with endless maps of the virus spreading across the country unconsciously seeped into the drawing as I started south and travelled across the paper to the north. War-like colonial metaphors abounded in media reporting of the ‘invasive’ particle; and a ‘war on the virus’ as the ‘invisible killer’. I now have an image of illness spreading across the body of the paper moving from cell to cell. As a ‘body’ of work, they also allude to the invisible realms of the microscopic, depicting clusters of viral growth and infection. Networks of blood vessels snake across the pages. The language of vaccination starts to enter the group’s consciousness too and the pencil marks seem to trace the forms of chains of mRNA proteins multiplying inside us. The internal and the unseen lurk in our fears of illness in our bodies.

Paul Klee famously described drawing as taking a line for a walk. Here my drawings had become like sprawling doodles responding to the group situation without my full conscious

control, reminiscent of the surrealist method of automatic drawing or ‘automatism’ a type of artmaking in which the artist suppresses conscious control over the making process, allowing the unconscious mind to take over. Here, they reveal something about the unconscious material of the group during this time but also appear throw away, like something doodled on the back of an envelope while my eyes were otherwise occupied, scanning the screen.

Doodling itself has been defined as a drawing made while a person's attention is otherwise occupied. Doodles are seen in the rest of life as inconsequential; the practice is by its nature ‘marginal’, existing in the periphery and often found literally on the edge of the page. My drawings could be seen similarly as a ‘biproduct’ of the group, ‘marginalia’ of the online process. They occupy a liminal space between my embodied physical self and the virtual group on screen.

These drawings are a waiting game, a record of time and temporality. Like repetitive marks on a prison wall, they embody the passing of time and speak of a life paused in ‘lockdown’. Minutes, hours, days, weeks elapsing. In the beginning I felt surrealness and disbelief, replaced by tedium - how long will this last? Caught in the never-ending doodle through time. The busy everyday slowed down with a new sense of stillness and alien quiet that was felt differently by everyone: relief, peacefulness, oppression, dread. The psychological situation of the pandemic brought its own acute states of mind to be survived, fear, anxiety, helplessness, rage.

Connection and disconnection

Account of drawing in groups 10 and 11

Group 10 started with some frustrating attempts at communication. I felt my drawings to be a bit frustrated and stylised too. I found I was looking too much at my paper and missing the group. I turned to the lines on screen and the background shapes and angles made by movements. I felt I needed to see the aliveness of the group in my work.

INSERT FIGURE 2.5 HERE

Figure 2.5. Pencil on paper, 30 cm x 30cm.

INSERT FIGURE 2.6 HERE

Figure 2.6. Pencil on paper, 30 cm x 30cm.

It was difficult not being able to read the more subtle non-verbal clues on Zoom, the turn of a shoulder, choice of position in the room, a meeting of eyes. Reaching out had to be done verbally, very different from the feeling of sitting side by side in quiet companionship. When people asked each other how they were doing, it sometimes elicited the answer that people just didn't know. None of us knew how we felt at times in this strange situation. Could we just 'be' together in the virtual space as we would in the real-life studio?

These groups often bubbled with tensions and a good many political disagreements. There are angry exchanges over the behaviour of the Government's chief adviser Dominic Cummings or the economic agenda versus the health agenda. Myself and my co-therapist often intervene, reflecting back the difficulties. Some people like to feel we can argue, rather than feel silenced, and sometimes the group is a place where people can hold different opinions. However sometimes the conflict is too much, and one or other person finishes the group annoyed or upset. We then bring it to the next session. The group mostly survives a lot

of political fracturing and disagreement, but we were not always successful at containing these conflicts. Splits in society seemed to manifest themselves in the group and as the pandemic went on some members felt increasingly anxious, paranoid, fractured and on the edge.

INSERT FIGURE 2.7 HERE

Figure 2.7. Pencil on paper, 30 cm x 30cm.

INSERT FIGURE 2.8 HERE

Figure 2.8. Pencil on paper, 30 cm x 30cm.

Account of drawing in groups 12 to 14

Amidst disagreement on politics the group talk about more personal things. A mother movingly told the group about seeing her son over skype, after time apart, as an adult with his own sexual identity. Two members talk about childhood memories and being left by their fathers. These moments of connection bring the group closer. At times like these, members sometimes say they find the group helpful and there is an air of reflectiveness. I found I made cohesive images in these groups (Figures 7 and 8). I end the accounts here after 14 weeks of groups. By now the group had taken on its own identity and seemed to generally be useful to most members as a support, however it continued to be a tumultuous place at times, continuing for another month online before we returned to the studio in person.

The possibilities of meaningful connection co-exist painfully with the limitations of our relating online, that seemed to amplify 'real life' interactions where navigating relationships with others in the old studio was often a place of conflict. This phase of drawing includes repeating motives and I see mark making as having a particular 'tone' or atmosphere that related to the group. Dragging a pencil over a paper, the feeling of drawing became a textural, sensory and embodied act that responded to the moods of the group. Pressing hard and pushing a pencil into the page produced a myriad of marks, scratchy, jagged and shiny with lead, or pencil 'strokes' on the skin of the paper leave feathery almost invisible traces.

As a macro view these drawings suggest to me a topography or a landscape, a city at night or groupings of stars in space. 'Zoomed out' they are reminiscent of a global view of our interconnectedness, perhaps? They remind me of way the virus at first had seemed to bring the idea of universality as it ignored state borders and crossed continents impacting the human population worldwide, but this narrative was quickly replaced by evidence of the social and political inequality that the pandemic revealed. Our group in the UK were immersed in media stories carried to us in news broadcasts and over radio signals, fibreoptic cables and satellite dishes.

The drawings fan out in lines that remind me that as a group we were only present via webs of wires and wireless connections, nodes and hubs, linking us up across the city streets via our devices. At times of conflict in the group this felt precarious, it was as though the fabric of reality hung by threads as we were atomised in our new socially distanced isolation. The drawings illuminate for me the emotional impact of the uncertainty and fragmentation of the pandemic on us all, especially so for those experiencing longstanding mental health difficulties, surviving day to day in a society itself in existential crisis.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have set out a visual exploration using drawing, by myself as an art therapist, alongside group members in a therapeutic space online. Considering my drawings, contextualised by accounts of their making, I see three overlapping phases of drawing. These move from fragmented with singular entities, to attempts to connect with the humanness of the group via portraits, into complex interconnected structural networks and doodle-like forms as I started to develop a visual language for my experience of the group.

I found drawing was more than an attempt to capture my feelings to be reflected on later, rather, the act of drawing played an active and embodied part in my exploration of the online space and learning as a therapist in it. Drawing was a way of working something out, what the online space was for and what its potential was. It contained me (Bion 1962) and allowed me to feel free to experiment and explore (Winnicott 1971).

With hindsight my drawings also suggested to me something about the latent material of the group, evoked in me during this period, and bring up themes of time, temporality, space, and place as well as illness and fragmentation - although these meanings are not fixed in the drawings themselves which will hold multiple ambiguities. I see the drawings as a manifestation of the group process itself as we felt our way into being together online; the wish for connection, amidst acute states of mind that were difficult to bear. Seen together, the drawings are a record of our seeking and exploration, as we adapted to the changed environment online and offline, and to new existential fears brought on by the pandemic.

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